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Women for the Land

Empowering Women Landowners to Conserve Their Land

Nearly 301 million acres of U.S. land—about a third of the nation’s land in farms—are now farmed or co-farmed by women, and at least 87 million additional acres are in the hands of women landowners.

The New Faces of American Farming

Over the past few decades, women have entered agriculture in unprecedented numbers. Increasingly, women own farmland, are new farmers or have become more involved in all aspects of agriculture.

There are now nearly one million women farm operators, and over half-a-million additional women landowners who lease their land to farmers. Nearly 301 million acres of U.S. land—about a third of the nation’s land in farms—are now farmed or co-farmed by women, and at least 87 million additional acres are in the hands of women landowners.

Over the next 20 years, about 240 million acres of farmland are expected to change hands as farmers retire or leave their land to the next generation. During that time, women and non-farming landlords are likely to increase in numbers.

Research shows that many women farmers and landowners have a strong conservation and stewardship ethic. They are deeply committed to healthy farmland, farm families and farm communities. However, women face gender barriers affecting their ability to manage their land for long-term sustainability. And while women increasingly are the primary decision makers on farms, data shows they are underrepresented in conservation programs.



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It's the good-old-boys club...and you're the new kid on the block. We're just not taken seriously enough.

B.K., PARTICIPANT IN AN AFT LEARNING CIRCLE FOR WOMEN LANDOWNERS



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Women for the Land Initiative

American Farmland Trust's national *Women for the Land* initiative addresses the obstacles that women landowners face in accessing conservation programs and resources. In part, the initiative hosts "learning circles" that empower women landowners to adopt environmentally sound farming practices, protect farmland and improve the viability of their farms.

Women for the Land combines research, on-the-ground projects and policy efforts to transform the agricultural landscape and develop a new voice for conservation. It has three components:

1. RESEARCH INTO WOMEN LANDOWNERS AND THE BARRIERS THEY FACE

Little research exists on the millions of Americans who own and lease agricultural land, especially women. The long-running USDA Census of Agriculture provides a lot of information about American farmers, but it only surveys farmers—not non-farming agricultural landowners. To fill this critical research gap, AFT developed and tested a new national landowner's survey and is working to secure resources to launch the survey in 2018 in partnership with the USDA National Agricultural Statistic Survey (NASS). The survey will help us learn more about the long-term goals and needs of non-operating landowners.

Women face unique barriers to stewarding their farmland. In several studies, women indicated that feelings of inferiority, alienation and lack of knowledge impeded their ability to manage their land well. Women landowners attending learning circles in Illinois and Indiana cited gender bias as the most common barrier they faced in managing their land—stating they felt excluded and not taken seriously by men they worked with to implement new conservation practices. The second most commonly cited barrier was a lack of education and comfort. Many women are returning to farming after non-farming careers or are suddenly in positions of leadership on farms after the management situation has changed.

In addition, poor or insufficient communication between non-operating agricultural landowners and the farmers who lease their land is often a challenge,



We must engage women landowners in order to support sustainable agriculture. But we don't know enough about them. That has to change.

DR. ANN SORENSEN,
RESEARCH DIRECTOR,
AMERICAN FARMLAND
TRUST

resulting in less conservation overall. Efforts that educate both parties on how to work together as a team to manage farmland for profitability and long-term sustainability have enormous potential to increase conservation and soil health. AFT's *Women for the Land* initiative is testing new ways to facilitate this communication and provide tools that can help, such as conservation leases.

2. LEARNING CIRCLES TO ENGAGE WOMEN IN CONSERVATION

The *Women for the Land* initiative is rooted in AFT's work hosting "learning circles" for women landowners in the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic regions, starting in 2012. The circles are a well-tested approach pioneered by the Women, Food and Agriculture (WFAN) network that have brought nearly 4,000 women landowners together with female conservation professionals.

During learning circle events, attendees share their farm stories and discuss topics like soil health, wildlife habitat, farmland protection and planning for land succession. Afternoon farm tours allow attendees to "get their hands dirty" and see conservation practices first hand. Over 60 percent of the women who attend learning circles take a conservation action within a year, according to findings by WFAN and AFT. Conservation actions range from simply starting a conversation about changes in land management with family members or their managing farmers to implementing conservation practices and enrolling in financial assistance programs.

Based on this success, the *Women for the Land* initiative is expanding the learning circles. In 2016, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service office in Indiana incorporated AFT-led learning circles into their ongoing outreach and engagement programming. And in January 2017, AFT launched a three-year project to refine its learning circle model for women landowners in the Great Lakes region, particularly Ohio and New York. The project involves a communications campaign, toolkits, learning circles and workshops to engage both women landowners and farmers who lease their land. In Virginia and Maryland, AFT expanded the single learning circle format to three consecutive sessions in response to demand from participants to cover land succession planning and use of farm inventories for conservation planning.



We consistently hear from women landowners that they are surprised to find so many other women like them out there, and they are thrilled to learn from each other's experiences.

JENNIFER FILIPIAK,
MIDWEST DIRECTOR,
AMERICAN FARMLAND
TRUST



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The circles are so effective. The real value is in the networking. We could not have done this work without the support, resources, and knowledge of AFT.

JANE HARDISTY, USDA'S
NATURAL RESOURCES
CONSERVATION SERVICE,
INDIANA

I see women landowners as able to carry the torch of returning our land back to being healthy and sustainable.

J.A., PARTICIPANT IN AN AFT LEARNING CIRCLE FOR WOMEN LANDOWNERS



JEAN EELLS/E RESOURCES GROUP



3. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND POLICY REFORM TO BETTER SERVE WOMEN LANDOWNERS

The Farmland Information Center (FIC)—AFT’s national clearinghouse of information about farmland protection and stewardship in partnership with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service—will offer customized information and technical assistance to address the needs of women landowners. Through a website, toll-free hotline and written materials, the FIC will provide knowledge and training for women landowners and their farm advisors on conservation programs, farmland protection options, sample leases and succession plans.

AFT will also develop and advocate for new federal and state policies and programs that engage women landowners and farmers, including non-operating landowners. AFT will bring women landowner participants and other agricultural leaders to Washington, D.C. to share their unique perspectives on the importance of conserving and protecting working lands with USDA and other federal agencies. An important outcome will be a growing list of women farmers and landowners who can advocate for strong conservation policies and programs.

We want the successful engagement of women landowners to be a goal for everyone who works with farmers and landowners on conservation in agriculture.

American Farmland Trust’s Role

For over 35 years, AFT’s mission has been to protect farmland, promote sound farming practices and keep farmers on the land. AFT is a leader in working side-by-side with farmers and landowners to accelerate adoption of conservation practices. Women landowners often take a long-term view of their land and overwhelmingly support policies and programs that encourage new farmers, provide incentives for better conservation practices and protect farmland. These attributes make women ideal partners in conservation and farmland protection. Protecting the nation’s food, farmland, soil, wildlife and water supply requires participation from all farmers. Women’s voices are much too important to leave out.

CONTACT US

To learn more, about the **Women for the Land** initiative, visit www.farmland.org/womenlandowners or contact Jennifer Filipiak, AFT’s Midwest Director, at jfilipiak@farmland.org or (515) 868-1331.



The initiative’s core program—women learning from each other and from professional women role models—is consistently appreciated by participants across the country. It is their land that unites them, and their desire to see their farms stay farms in the future.

JIM BAIRD, MID-ATLANTIC DIRECTOR, AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST