

Women learn to care for land

By MARY SWALLA HOLMES

WHEN Laura Krouse, a Linn County Soil and Water commissioner for 20 years, first agreed to facilitate three women landowner learning circles, she was skeptical. The goal of directly improving water quality by educating and empowering women

landowners seemed overly optimistic. "I'm happy to report there were several women landowners who made positive changes in their landscape directly as a result of the project," says Krouse.

The Women Caring for the Land project, funded by a grant from the McKnight Foundation, was initiated by the Women, Food and Agriculture

Network, or WFAN. It is an extension of work begun 20 years ago by Denise O'Brien. "I began to notice that even though Larry and I were partners in our farming operation, very few women were recognized as active farmers," says O'Brien. "I was giving speeches in other coun-



tries about the politics of food, and yet here at home, women's voices were often not heard by government agencies."

A pilot project that included listening sessions was in Cass County, where O'Brien farms. From those sessions, it was clear women faced a whole set of issues when it came to making decisions about their land.

Women landowners prefer to receive information in different ways than men. While men are accustomed to going into government offices and discussing their plans for their farming operations, the women felt uncomfortable.

They preferred more informal, interactive sessions where they could learn as much from each other as from the expert. Many of the terms and programs were unfamiliar to them, and they desired the opportunity to study and learn in a social setting. This desire led to the idea for the learning circles.

After identifying women landowners, invitations and brochures explaining the project were sent to more than 500 women landowners in Johnson, Linn and Jones counties. Working with the NRCS district conservationist in each county, a series of meetings and field days were held. Women landowners learned about conservation programs and how they work to improve soil and water quality. They were also informed of cost sharing and loan programs that are available to implement conservation practices. Since many of the women landowners have tenant farmers, a tenant farmer known for good conservation practices spoke from his perspective to each of the groups. The women were able to ask questions and have discussions about leases and other tenant issues.

Project to be continued

A field trip was held in March, covering all three counties. The women looked at examples of both good and poor practices and observed the impact of the practices on the soil and water.

At the final meeting, Margaret Smith, Iowa State University Extension specialist in sustainable agriculture and a farmer from Hampton, led a conversation about farm leases.

WFAN plans to continue and expand this project as resources allow. Executive Director Leigh Adcock explained, "We now see that much more conservation education is needed for both women landowners and their tenants if we hope to change Iowa's landscape and improve our water quality. As more and more farmland transfers into the hands of women, our educational efforts need to increase."

Holmes is a conservation liaison with the Iowa Learning Farm.

For more information

NEARLY half of Iowa landowners are women and they need to be empowered to manage their land. The Women Caring for the Land project offers conservation education. For information, visit www.wfan.org.



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