

Women and Land Transitions: *Opportunities for Environmental Stewardship Through Targeted Outreach*

Conservation practices on America's working lands are critical to solving the farm, food and environmental challenges of the future. Many farmers and ranchers rent land on a short-term basis, so conservation efforts must be a partnership between landowners and the farmers working the land. As a result, working with landowners from diverse backgrounds will be a critical component of our nation's work to safeguard the environment and feed a growing population over the long-term.

The Changing Face of Farm and Ranch Landowners

In the United States, the demographic makeup on farms and ranches is undergoing dramatic change. Since more than half of principal farm operators are 55 years of age or older, discussions on the future of the nation's working lands have focused primarily on the aging farm population. What has been missing is a greater awareness of the changing role of women in agriculture and in land ownership, and their potential for helping improve conservation.

While the percentage of leased farmland has remained relatively constant over the past century, the demographics of people seeking land to produce food and other agricultural products and that of agricultural landowners who want to lease their land have changed. While 31 percent of landlords are men, 40 percent are women and another 29 percent are joint male and female landowners. Moreover, the significance of female landowners is expected to increase as the overall farm population ages: 70 percent of farmland is expected to change hands in the next 20 years and women may own up to 75 percent of the land that is transferred.

Tapping into a Conservation Ethic

Research indicates that female landowners tend to have values that draw them to conservation practices on the land. Women tend to pursue diversification of crops and farm projects. They also often see land as a community asset, a place of beauty and a legacy to future generations. These traits help make female landowners ideal conservation partners.



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The 2012 Farm Bill offers the chance to address the impending demographic shift in farm ownership and operation while capitalizing on the stewardship ethic that many female landowners share. While there are numerous ways to achieve these aims, American Farmland Trust proposes two targeted ideas:

- **Develop user-friendly tools to inform and engage female landowners:** AFT recommends that USDA develop a curriculum and suite of materials on conservation options geared toward the goals and values of female landowners. At the same time, USDA should train information providers, such as Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, on how to better engage female landowners. Focusing in strategic areas where these demographic shifts are projected to be most pronounced, such as Illinois and Iowa in the Upper Mississippi River Basin, could have significant and immediate impacts on critical environmental issues.
- **Invest in creating outreach strategies geared to women:** In order to ensure that these engagement efforts are effective, USDA must put outreach strategies into place unlike any that have come before. Current ways to deliver information were created with male landowners in mind, so new learning models must be developed to address the unique characteristics of female landowners. Research indicates that an effective engagement model for women is to use a peer-to-peer model, such as “learning circles,” that can be adapted to engage women landowners in new on-farm practices. Initial explorations of unique outreach and engagement strategies for women in agriculture have found some promising results, but there is much more work to be done. Future efforts in this area should focus on ways to fine-tune and scale up these alternative engagement strategies in order to reach women landowners more effectively.

These recommendations represent just the beginning of a significant new challenge for federal farm and food policy. As the seismic shift in land ownership looms on the horizon, effective outreach to female landowners can have significant impact on soil and water quality throughout the country, but we must act now before the new wave of land transitions begins. The next ten years presents a significant window of opportunity for empowering female landowners to promote healthy soil, clean air and water, and abundant wildlife on their agricultural land. We must build on existing successes and work to fully engage female landowners as key conservation partners.



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