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Women, land and legacy: Agricultural policy for changing landownership

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Women, land and legacy: Agricultural policy for changing landownership

Abstract
Iowa farm women offer their opinions on how the next federal Farm Bill should be crafted.

Keywords
Human systems demographics and beginning farmer programs, Policy

Disciplines
Gender and Sexuality | Human Geography | Policy Design, Analysis, and Evaluation

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Abstract: Iowa farm women offer their opinions on how the next federal Farm Bill should be crafted.

Question & Answer
Q: What things do Iowa farm women consider to be important in the next Farm Bill?

A: The state's farm women favor inclusion of natural resource programs that reward farmers.

Background

Women hold a unique and important position in the food and agriculture system. They own almost half of the nation’s agricultural land as well as a disproportionately high percentage of the nation’s small, alternative-crop farms. They also receive the majority of food and nutrition program payments, and they are the primary shoppers and food preparers for their households. Federal farm policy impacts women differently than it does men, yet women previously have not had a distinct voice in the debate over the federal Farm Bill.

Objectives of this project were to:
• Help policy makers working on the 2007 Farm Bill understand the needs and priorities of women farmers, landowners, and others concerned about agricultural and food policy.
• Provide women farmers and landowners with the tools and support they need to contact policy makers so their votes can be heard in the policy making process.
• Develop a report and brochure outlining Iowa women farmers’ and landowners’ political and economic power, their value for their land, and their priorities for the 2007 Farm Bill.
• Circulate the report and brochure to participants and other organizations working on Farm Bill policy.

Approach and methods

Ten Farm Bill listening sessions were conducted in 2006, reaching approximately 50 women. Some sites were chosen to correspond with the counties in which the Women, Land, and Legacy (WLL) program is active. There are no WLL groups in the Iowa City or Sioux City areas, but sessions were held there to offer urban women an opportunity to speak and offer suggestions.

Sessions were held in Chariton, February 27; Ottumwa, February 28; Garner, March 2; Elkader, March 7; Clarion, March 9; Atlantic, March 13; Iowa City, March 21; Cresco, March 23; Marshalltown, March 28; and Sioux City, April 11.
The evening listening sessions were held in public spaces such as libraries, community meeting rooms in banks, and county extension offices. Sessions were publicized using direct mail invitations, emails to listservs of Iowa-based agricultural and environmental organizations. Press releases were sent to local papers and radio stations as well as the *Des Moines Register*.

Participants received a packet of materials including information on the two most recent Farm Bills and how to contact legislators and express their concerns effectively. Facilitators explained the program, its objectives, and the Farm Bill Primer, and guided participant discussion of Farm Bill programs.

**Results and discussion**

The majority of the participant comments focused on commodity programs, conservation programs, and beginning farmer issues. The first and most prominent discussion at most of the listening sessions, however, was the structure of the Farm Bill itself, including:

- How broadly the bill impacts the lives of all Americans,
- How little most people know about the bill,
- The complexity of the bill, and
- The lack of information available to help people learn about Farm Bill programs.

Prior to attending the session, most participants believed the Farm Bill dealt mainly with the farm commodity support programs. Women often were surprised to learn that the Food Stamp program is the largest element in the Farm Bill. Impressions were collected from participants relating to all 10 titles of the Farm Bill. Attendance at the sessions was not as high as organizers hoped.

**Conclusions**

Women have important perspectives to contribute to the Farm Bill debate, and the listening sessions gathered information on their greatest concerns.

- Participants were strongly critical of current commodity programs. They favor a cap on commodity payments and programs that support more diverse farming systems.
- Women are strong proponents of conservation programs that reward farmers for their stewardship practices, and they favor continued political and financial support for conservation programs. However, many women would like to see changes in the structure and implementation of some programs so they do not encourage inflated land prices and absentee land ownership.
- Women were particularly enthusiastic about the Conservation Security Program, which they feel has value for the farmer, environment, and non-farming public.
- Participants want programs that integrate conservation, rural development, and nutrition goals by fostering the growth of local food systems.
- Participants favor changes in nutrition programs so they include more fresh fruits and vegetables and help support local farmers who grow these items.
- Women want programs that offer incentives for beginning farmers, but they also want to see increased opportunity in the agricultural sector in general, so more young people will want to farm.
- Women want affordable health insurance options, which they also believe will encourage more people to begin farming.
- Participants would like to be educated about Farm Bill programs that are available to them beyond commodity support.

Perhaps most importantly, participants wanted to know more about the Farm Bill itself. Women who attended the sessions were surprised to learn about the sheer scope of
the Farm Bill programs. Every group emphasized the need for both public education about the Farm Bill and increased education for farmers and landowners about Farm Bill programs that might benefit them. A strong conclusion emerging from the data is the need for increased outreach to the public, perhaps through a media campaign, as well as the development of educational materials that use simple terminology to inform potential participants about Farm Bill programs. As several participants suggested, perhaps the name of the bill itself should be changed to the Farm and Food Bill to more accurately reflect the true scope of the legislation.

Impact of results

Participants’ views were shared widely within the sustainable agriculture community and continue to be available on the WFAN web site at http://www.wfan.org/leopold_report.pdf.

Education and outreach

A Farm Bill flier showing results of the listening sessions was distributed at the 2006 Iowa State Fair and farm conferences during the year. All listening sessions participants received a report on the proceedings. Findings from the sessions were published in the summer 2006 WFAN newsletter.

Leveraged funds

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