



Outreach Partnerships



Washington State FSA Contributes to Women in Ag Conferences

In February 2012, women producers from throughout the state of Washington did something they rarely do - met neighboring women producers at a statewide conference.

In trying to overcome barriers to women producers attending conferences and workshops, planners tried a new and unique format. Women producers responded by registering in large numbers and rating the event an overwhelming success. More than 480 women participated in the Washington Women in Agriculture Conference which took place simultaneously in 16 locations throughout the state.

Feedback from past conferences and workshops identified travel to events as being a major barrier for women to participate. Women producers have difficulty leaving farm, family and community commitments for any length of time. This difficulty is compounded by the timing of most conferences and workshops taking place in winter. Winter works best for farm schedules but Washington roads and mountain passes pose travel challenges and family and community commitments increase with school activities.

The conference brought together the advantages of a statewide event with the advantages of local workshops.

The curriculum included national speakers broadcast via Washington State University's (WSU's) videoconferencing equipment and local panels of women farmers and ranchers. On-site facilitators led networking and local discussions.

Lyn Garling, farmer, Integrated Pest Management Specialist and a founder of the Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network, spoke about *Farming as a Woman: My Own Private Reality Show*. Washington women were delighted to learn the Pennsylvania farmer was originally from Goldendale, WA. She also expanded her farm with an FSA farm ownership loan. Rita Emmet, consultant and author, discussed *Blast Away Procrastination and Get It Done Now*. Participants received autographed copies of her book, "The Procrastinator's Handbook - Mastering the Art of Doing It Now."

Comments from participants indicated that they liked the national speakers and were already working on action plans from what they learned. For many, the best part of the whole conference was meeting other women who farm and ranch in their areas. Some women commented that this was the first time they met some of their neighboring women producers. In many locations, they took the initiative to continue the local networking after the conference. Participants in all locations asked for additional educational and networking opportunities, including farm walks, workshops, webinars and more.

A statewide group of planners came together to develop the conference and bring resources from around the state. The group consisted of Extension agents, FSA, NRCS, RMA, NASS, Farm Credit Services, WSDA, women farmers and representatives of agricultural organizations. Margaret Viebrock, Douglas County Extension Agent, secured a USDA Risk Management Education grant to fund the conference. The Farm Service Agency also sponsored the conference and the Farm Credit Services provided material support.



The planning group arranged for speakers, technology, publicity, curriculum, registration and more. In addition to on-site facilitation, local facilitators coordinated facilities, local publicity and producer panels.

The Farm Service Agency played a major role in organizing the conference. The 2007 Census of Agriculture showed a 20 percent increase in the number of women principal operators in the state since the previous Census of Agriculture. The number of loans to women farmers did not show the same increase and FSA in Washington made outreach to women producers a priority. Unlike some other states, Washington does not have a network of women agricultural producers. Therefore by establishing partnerships with key planners and other organizations, FSA had an opportunity to connect with women producers.

FSA county offices throughout the state helped promote the conference and in some cases made recommendations for local panel speakers. Farm Loan Specialist Tanya Dostal was a member of the planning team and the site facilitator for the Mt. Vernon site, which had the largest attendance with about 80 women. CED Michel Ruud assisted at the Wenatchee site. State Outreach Coordinator Chris Bieker assisted at the Spokane site and helped with overall planning. State Office employees Mitzi Stephens and Kristina Scott put together registration packets and district directors Brian Miller and Steve Hoag transported materials to two of the event locations.

Site locations included: Colville, Deer Park, Everett, Friday Harbor, Goldendale, Kennewick, Mt. Vernon, Nespelam, Olympia, Port Hadlock, Republic, Spokane, Vancouver, Walla Walla, Wenatchee and Yakima. Presentations were translated into Spanish at two of the locations.

Past statewide conferences attracted about 140 producers to an event in East Wenatchee. The planning group hoped for 250-300 attendees at the recent conference. The participation exceeded all expectations. The group plans to continue providing educational opportunities for women producers and is exploring ways to maintain the networking. The Washington Women in Ag website is www.WomeninAg.wsu.edu.

For information on FSA programs, visit www.fsa.usda.gov.