

A publication of
Growing New Farmers

A northeast service providers consortium
GNF Professional Development Series #217



Program: The Women's Agricultural Network

Organization: The Women's Agricultural Network

Dates: 1995 to present

Targeted to: Prospective Farmers – Recruits, Explorers and Planners – and Beginning Farmers – Startups, Re-strategizers and Establishers

Need

Women have traditionally been an underserved group in programs designed to help people establish or enhance farms or agriculture-related businesses. Because of this, women may not have been encouraged to take leadership roles in the agriculture sector. Therefore, many women may have lacked the necessary business skills and network to establish and develop successful agriculture businesses.

Response

Through a series of educational, technical assistance and networking opportunities, the Women's Agricultural Network (WAgN) works to increase the number of women owning and operating profitable farms and agriculture-related businesses. The program also strives to elevate women's profile in leadership positions throughout the agricultural sectors of business, government and community.

The WAgN offers programs to support and encourage women at varying levels. Its programs meet the needs of women whether they're developing and assessing business ideas or at the stage of advanced planning and implementation.

The WAgN provides necessary information and education for participants to assess the feasibility of agriculture as a career choice. It also educates women on economically feasible and environmentally sound management practices that lead to increased profitability.

The program seeks to build an effective network of federal, state and local partnerships to provide women with a comprehensive continuum of services.

While the WAgN programs are targeted specifically toward woman, men are welcome to attend programs and access services.

Funding

The WAgN is funded through a combination of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grants and support from University of Vermont Extension System.

Partners

The WAgN is a collaborative effort of the University of Vermont Extension System, the University of Vermont's Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the USDA. Other partners include the Women's Agriculture Network-Maine, Beginner Farmers of New Hampshire and Vermont's Women's Business Center.

Outreach

The WAgN programs are publicized on its website: <http://www.uvm.edu/~wagn/>. There are also links to the WAgN website on the websites of the program's partners.

Analysis

SUCSESSES: The WAgN programs have enrolled 1,200 women throughout the Northeast. Some 200 people have successfully completed the Growing Places program. Support groups, which offer woman opportunities to network and learn from others, regularly attract 150 people to discussions throughout the state. Another 635 participants have received technical assistance and help with developing business plans, with more than 200 business plans being written. The WAgN has presented 55 workshops to 780 people. Of those, 89% felt that their businesses were more efficient and profitable because of having attended the program.

CHALLENGES: Continued funding is always a challenge. It's difficult to balance the needs of beginning farmers with those of more experienced and mature farmers. A third challenge is trying to stay current on all the new programs and opportunities available to the farm community.

Next Steps

The WAgN is developing a manual to be used by other states and communities that want to start a woman's agricultural network. The manual will be easily accessed on WAgN's website.

The WAgN instituted an on-line Growing Places program in the fall of 2003. And it plans an advanced support group for people who need to refine their business plans after farming for a few years.

Additional Resources

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February 2004

