

Wisconsin Women Farmers: Conservation Practices, Information Gathering, and Opportunities for U.W.-Extension

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Introduction: The research detailed in this paper is part of a larger project “Effective Outreach for a New Wisconsin Agriculture: A Social Marketing Approach to the Environmental Management Needs of Hispanic and Women Farmers.” The research is funded by the North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Grant program and conducted by staff at the Environmental Resources Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with outreach support from the Wisconsin Farm Center, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection. This report is the second in a two part series.¹

Objectives and Methods

The goal of this project is to increase the effectiveness of outreach strategies to serve the growing number of women farm principal operators in Wisconsin.² We targeted our research activities on women principal operators in two sectors: direct marketing and dairy.

Three research objectives guided our research:

- (1) gain a better understanding of Wisconsin women farm operators,
- (2) learn about constraints, resource and information needs, and environmental management practices of these farmers, and
- (3) identify ways in which the University of Wisconsin Extension (UWEX) and other farm support organizations and institutions can better serve women farmers.

We used several methods to accomplish these objectives:

- (1) Mailed 601 surveys to women farmers (373 responses, 62% response rate) who reported in the 2002 or 2007 agricultural censuses that they were women, the principal farm operator, and marketing their product through direct marketing,³

¹ Research Brief #1: Hispanic Farmers in Wisconsin: Background and Information Needs. University of Wisconsin-Madison: Environmental Resources Center. 10/2010.

² The United States Census of Agriculture (2002) defines the “principal operator” as “The person primarily responsible for the on-site, day-to-day operation of the farm or ranch business. This person may be a hired manager or business manager.” Our study defined principal operator as those women who farm solo or with a spouse or partner, but who make or help make the main decisions about how the farm is managed.

³ The United States Census of Agriculture is conducted every five years by the Department of Agriculture. Census data for Wisconsin are collected and analyzed by the Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics Service (WASS). For our research, we used the mailing lists compiled from the WASS database for the 2002 and 2007 censuses of Agriculture. We sent out 601 surveys to Wisconsin women farmers in the direct market sector from January - February 2009. Of these, 373 complete surveys were returned (62% response rate). We used a modified Dillman survey technique, where each potential respondent received 4 contacts from us (preliminary letter, first survey with letter, reminder postcard, and second survey with letter).

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- (2) Mailed 755 surveys to women dairy farmers (212 responses, 44% response rate) who reported in the 2002 or 2007 agricultural censuses that they were women, the principal farm operator, and operating a dairy farm,
- (3) Conducted preliminary interviews with twelve women farmers in the direct market sector,⁴
- (4) Conducted 8 in-depth interviews with women in the direct market sector,
- (5) Conducted 9 in-depth interviews with women in the dairy sector,
- (6) Held a discussion session, attended by over 40 direct market farmers,⁵
- (7) Held 3 focus groups of 6-8 women dairy farmers.

How many women farmers are there in Wisconsin?

The Census of Agriculture shows a 58% increase in the number of women principal operators in Wisconsin over the 10 year period from 1997 to 2007 – from 5,793 in 1997 to 9,176 in 2007. Our research focused on two groups of women farmers: those in the direct market sector, and those in the dairy sector. We targeted the direct market sector because of the prevalence of women farm operators in that sector. Research from the University of Wisconsin's Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS) found that while the number of women operating agricultural businesses has increased across all sectors of agriculture, women are more broadly represented as primary decision makers in the direct market sector (Roth & Lachenmayer, 2006).⁶ We targeted the dairy sector because of its importance and predominance in Wisconsin. Previous research from PATS (Vogt, et.al., 2001)⁷ documented the important role women play on dairy farms, but did not specifically address the views of women principal operators in the sector.⁸

Characteristics of Women Direct Market Farmers

Most women (72%) who operate non-dairy direct market farms in Wisconsin farm fewer than 100 acres. Figure 1 shows the products raised by women direct market farmers. Respondents identified all products grown or raised on the farm. The most frequently mentioned products raised were vegetables (40%), poultry and eggs (35%), beef (31%) and tree fruit (30%). Also mentioned were berries, sheep and goats, greenhouse production, row crops, pigs and several minor crops. When asked to choose the best category to describe their operation, less than half (37%) of the women described their farm as conventional, and the remainder described their farms as non-certified organic (30%), certified organic (6%), sustainable (16%), transitional organic (3%), biodynamic (1%), or other. Of our respondents, 65% described themselves as the primary farm operator; another 33% were

⁴ Preliminary interviews were conducted at two conference settings: the Midwest Value Added Farming Conference, Jan 24-25, 2008, Eau Claire, WI and the Midwest Organic Farming Conference, Feb. 21-23, 2008, La Crosse, WI. These interviews were meant to get a sense of what issues were regarded as important to women farmers, and to refine survey and interview tools for more in-depth analysis.

⁵ The discussion was a modified focus group, billed as a 'conversation circle for women farmers,' and held at the Organic Farming Conference held in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in February 2009.

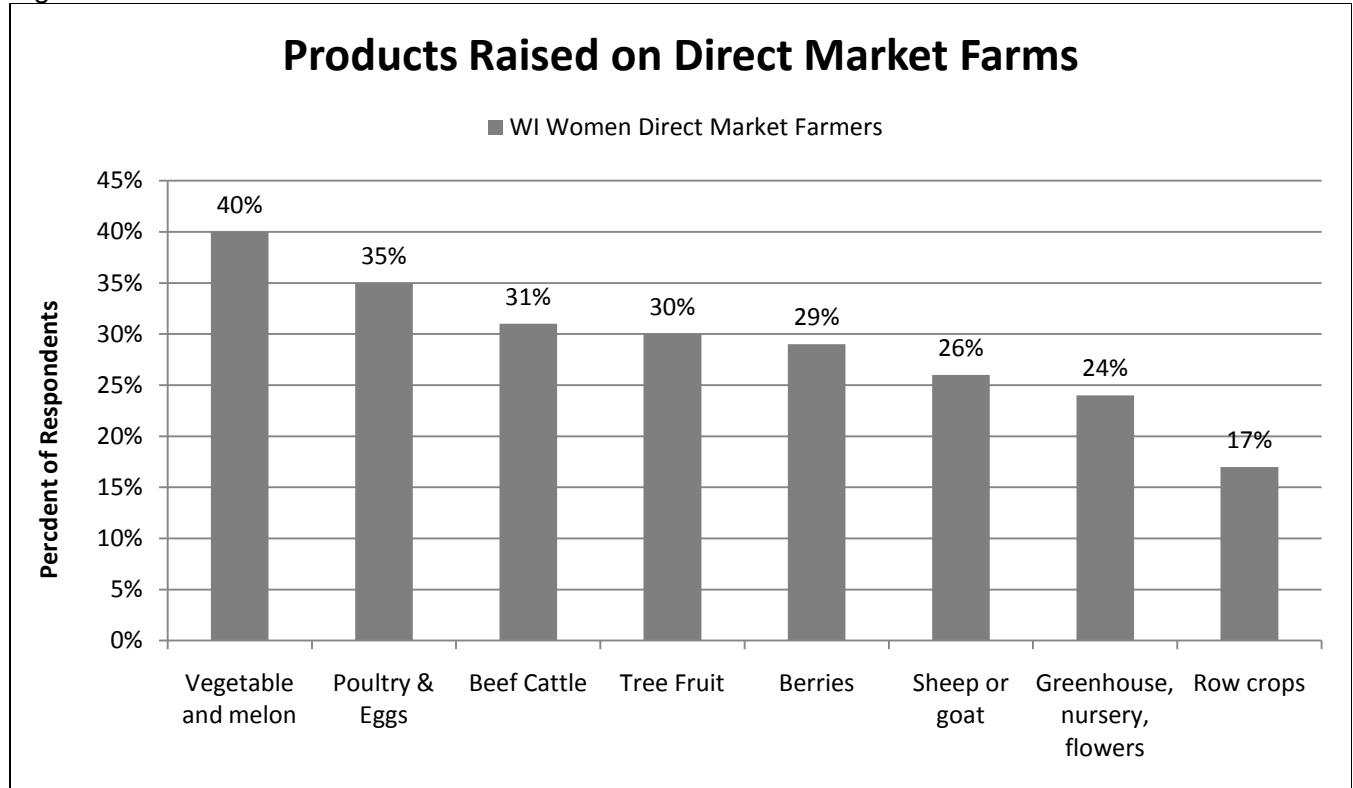
⁶ Roth, C. J. and C. Lachenmayer, 2006. "Women Farmers in Value-Added Agriculture" In *Status of Wisconsin Agriculture, 2006*, 42-47. University of Wisconsin-Madison: Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics.

⁷ Vogt, J., D. Jackson-Smith, M. Ostrom, S. Lezberg, 2001. "The Roles of Women on Wisconsin Dairy Farms at the Turn of the 21st Century," PATS Research Report No. 10. University of Wisconsin-Madison: Program on Agricultural Technology Studies.

⁸ In Wisconsin (2007), 6% of women principal operators are in the dairy sector (555 farms, out of 9,176 total), versus 1% for the rest of the country (3,363 farms, out of 306, 209 total (Census of Agriculture, 2007).

equal partners in a jointly managed farm. Over half of our respondents worked off farm full-time (30%) or part-time or seasonally (25%). Spouses who worked off-farm were more likely to work full-time (45%) than part-time (8%).

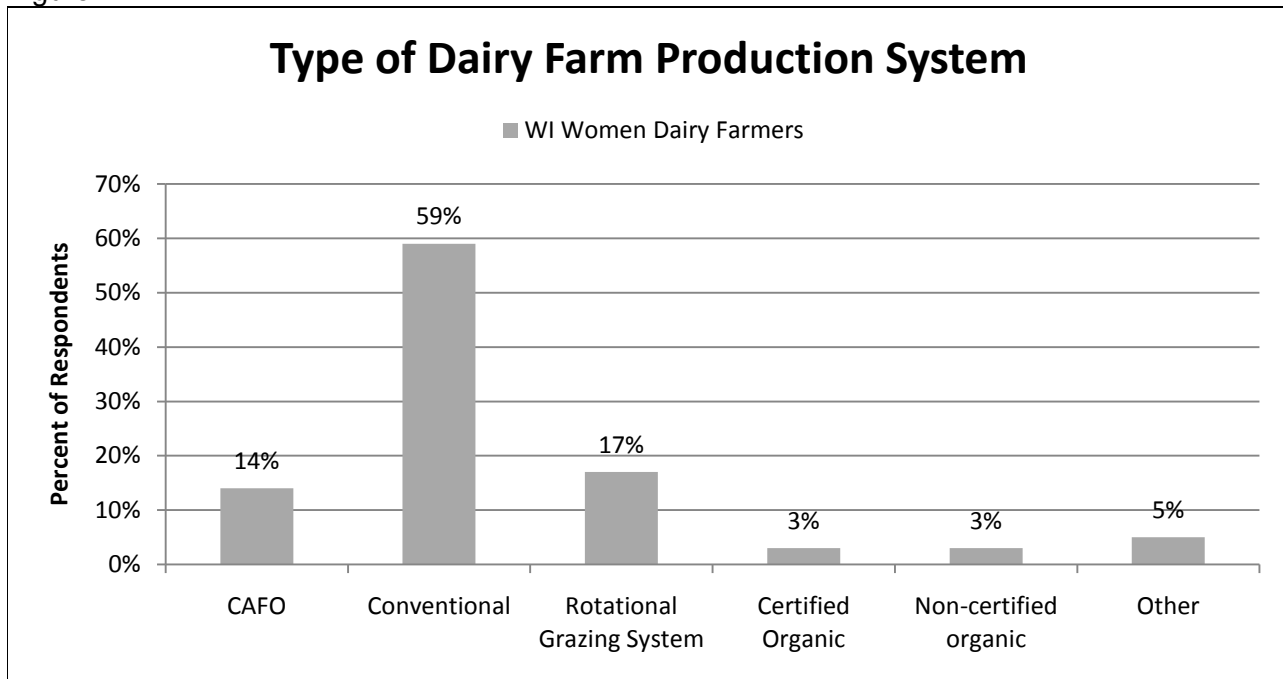
Figure 1



Characteristics of Women Dairy Farmers

The average woman dairy farmer in Wisconsin owns 188 acres and rents 75 acres, with the farm size ranging from 1-1,100 acres. Herd size averages 87 cows and ranges from 1-3,450 cows. When asked to choose the best category to describe their operation, most of the women dairy farmers described their operations as conventional (59%), with an additional 14% describing their farm as a concentrated animal feeding operation. The remainder described their operations as rotational grazing (17%), certified organic (3%), and non-certified or transitional organic (3%) (Figure 2). Dairy farm women work off farm less often than do direct market women farmers, with respondents reporting that they work off farm full-time (12%) or part-time/seasonally (12%). Spouses of dairy farm women are also less likely to work off farm (23% full time, 8% part time) than spouses of women direct market farmers.

Figure 2



Women Farmers and Their Conservation Practices

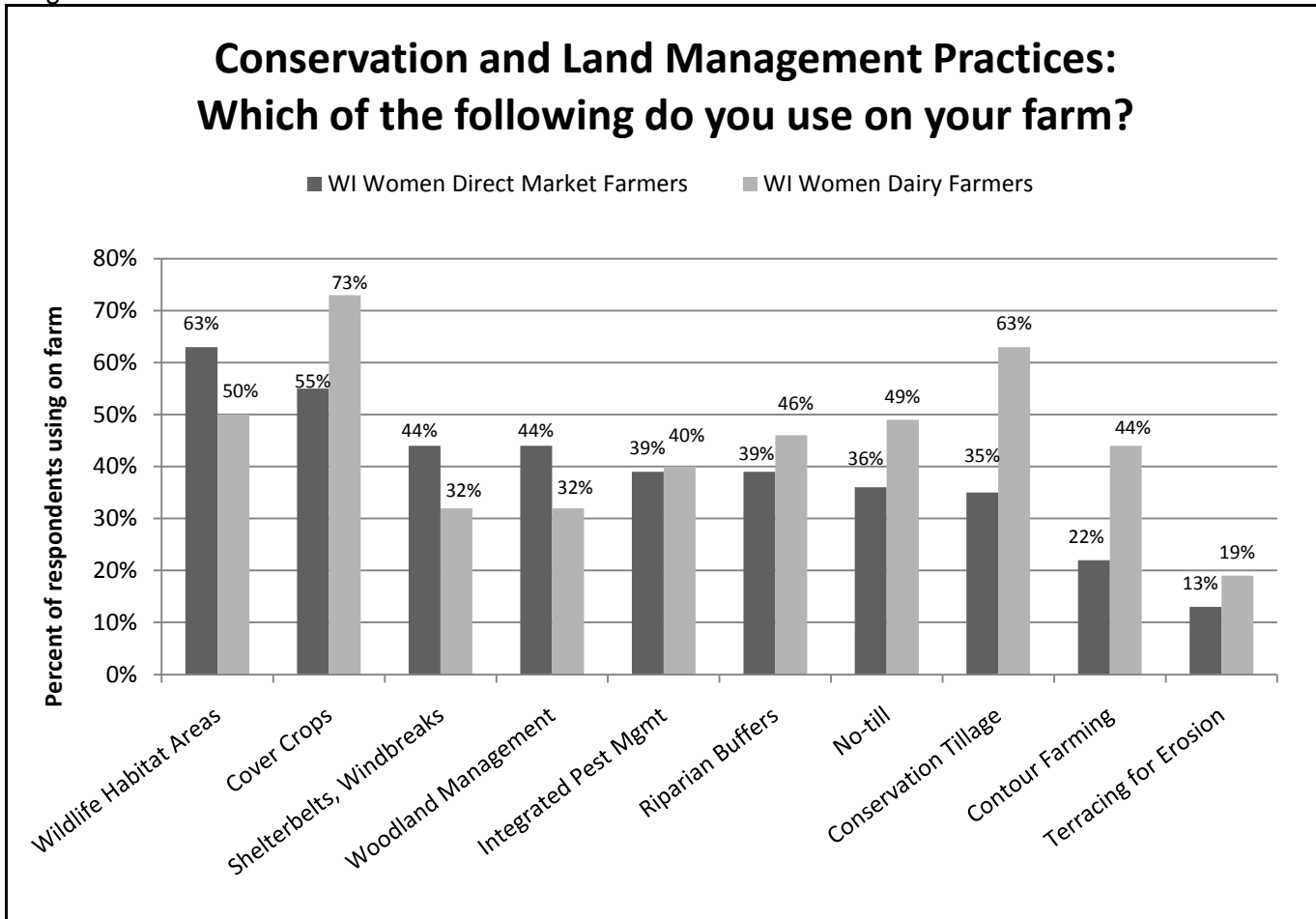
Many women farm operators use conservation management planning. Women dairy farmers have a higher rate of use of conservation planning than do women direct market farmers. This finding is not unexpected, as dairy farm operators manage larger farms, grow row crops, and typically have larger numbers of animals on farm (Table 1).

Table 1

Planning Practice	WI Women Direct Market Farmers	WI Women Dairy Farmers
Soil and water conservation plan	42%	58%
Manure management plan	37%	59%
Nutrient and pesticide management plan	41%	51%
None of above	26%	21%

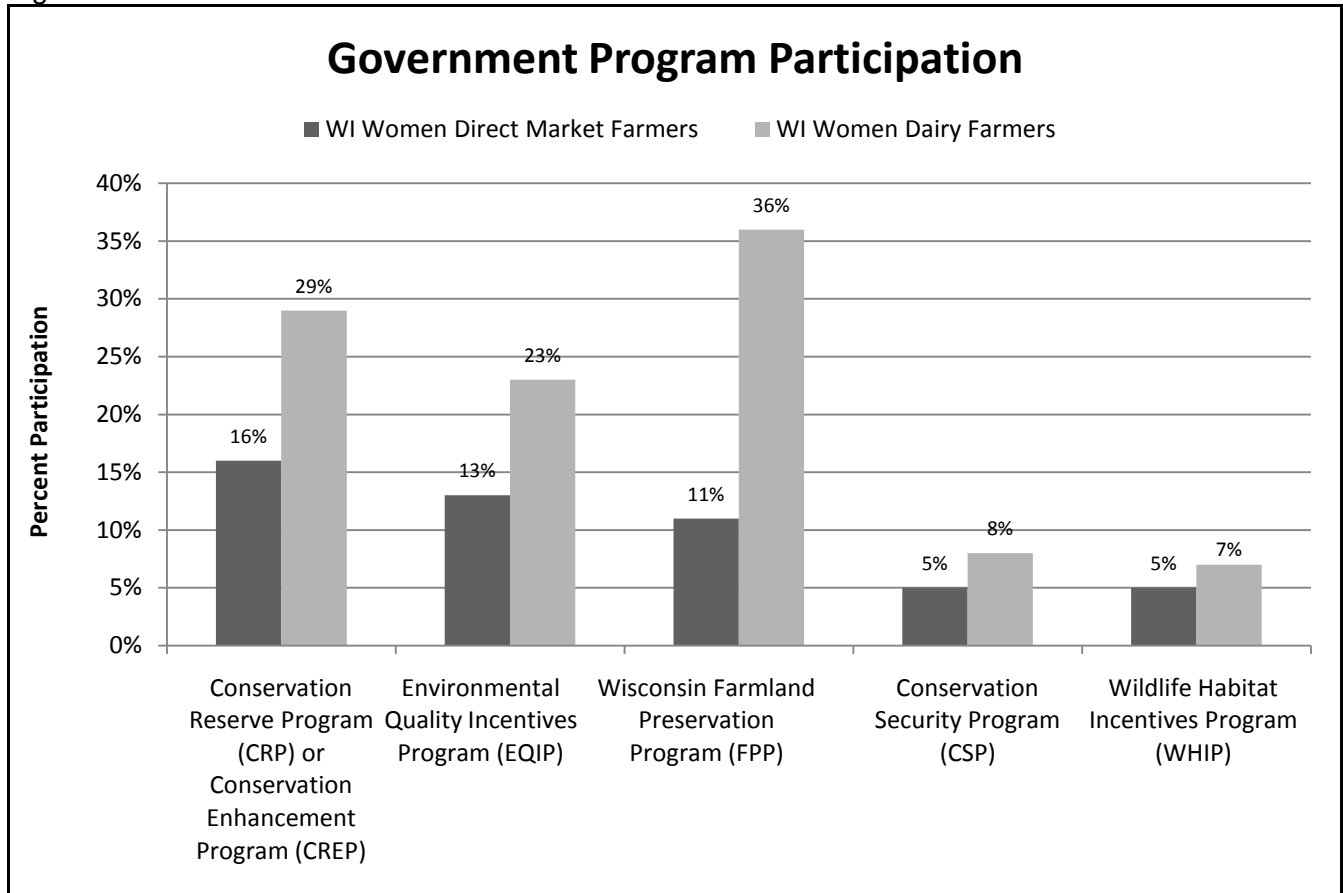
Figure 3 shows the use of crop management practices for both groups of women farmers. Women dairy farm operators are more inclined to use many of the conservation and land management practices. Again, this is an expected finding, as their farms are larger in size and many dairy farms raise row crops for feed.

Figure 3



Participation in government conservation programs (Figure 4) varies greatly between women direct market farmers and women dairy farmers. More women dairy farmers than women direct market farmers participate in government conservation programs. At least 42% of women direct market farmers report that they are not aware of various of the conservation programs - with the exception of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). With respect to the CRP and Conservation Enhancement Program (CREP), 46 percent of women direct market farmers reported that these programs do not fit their farms. Similarly, women dairy farmers reported that they are not aware of the Conservation Security Program (CSP, 44% unaware), the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP, 36% unaware), and EQIP (31% unaware), and that the CRP and CREP programs do not fit their farm (40%).

Figure 4



Where do Wisconsin Women Farmers get Information about Farming?

Women farmers get their information from a wide variety of sources (Figures 5-6). By far the most important way to get farming information is through farmer-to-farmer exchange, such as a conversation with neighbors, at a workshop, or on a list serve. Women dairy farmers value the information they get from family members, other farmers, and farm magazines and newspapers. Women dairy farmers are more likely to consult farm suppliers and equipment dealers, the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and bankers than are women direct market farmers. Only 36% of women direct market farmers, and 31% of women dairy farmers consult UW Extension.

A vast majority of women direct market farmers consider the internet to be a “somewhat important” or “very important” source of information (77%), in contrast to 58% of women dairy farmers. Both groups of farmers describe it as being difficult to navigate and sometimes overwhelming. The University of Wisconsin-Extension website and the WI Department of Agriculture website were described as being more difficult to find and use than sites from other universities or from private industry.

Figure 5

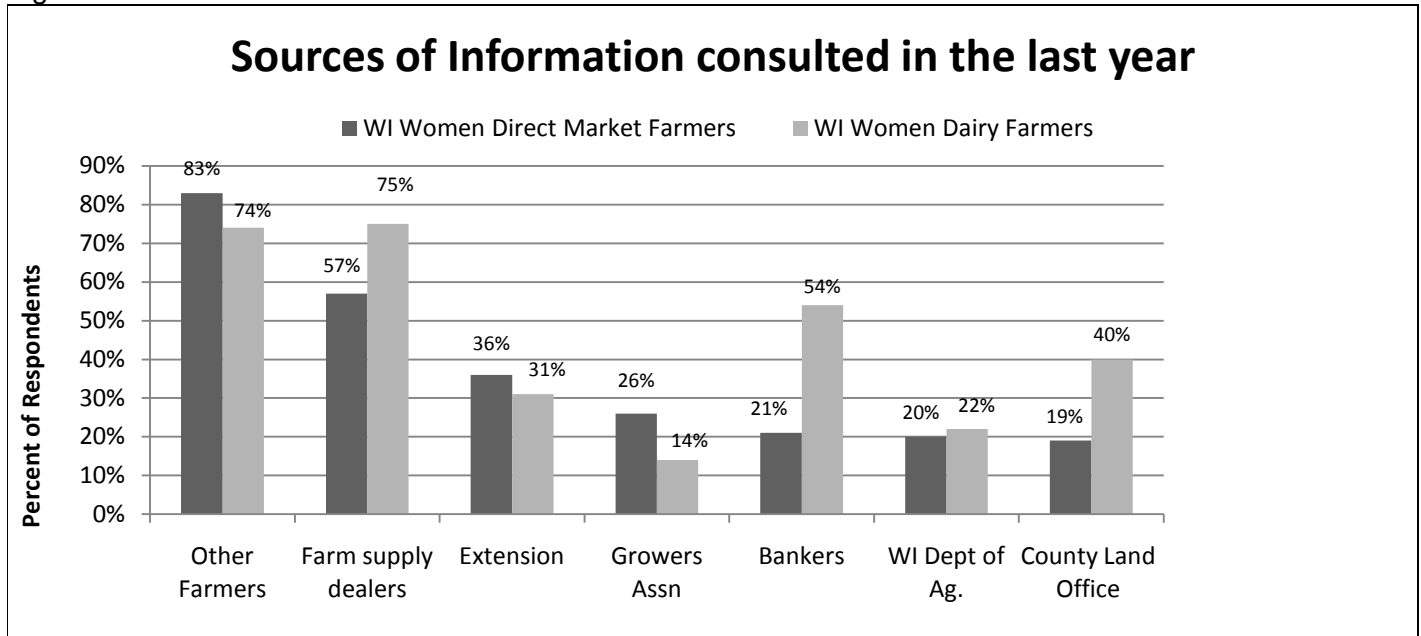
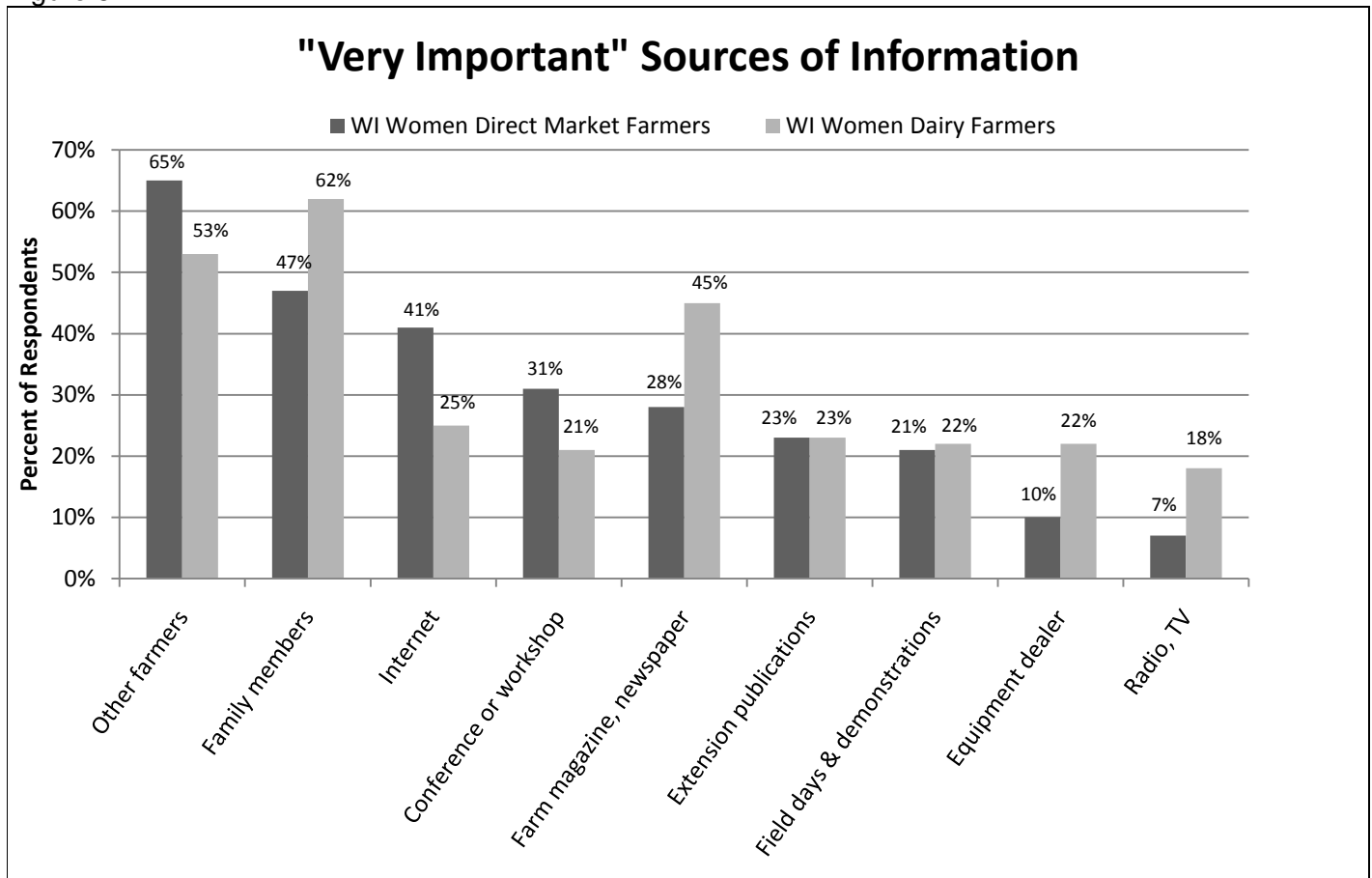


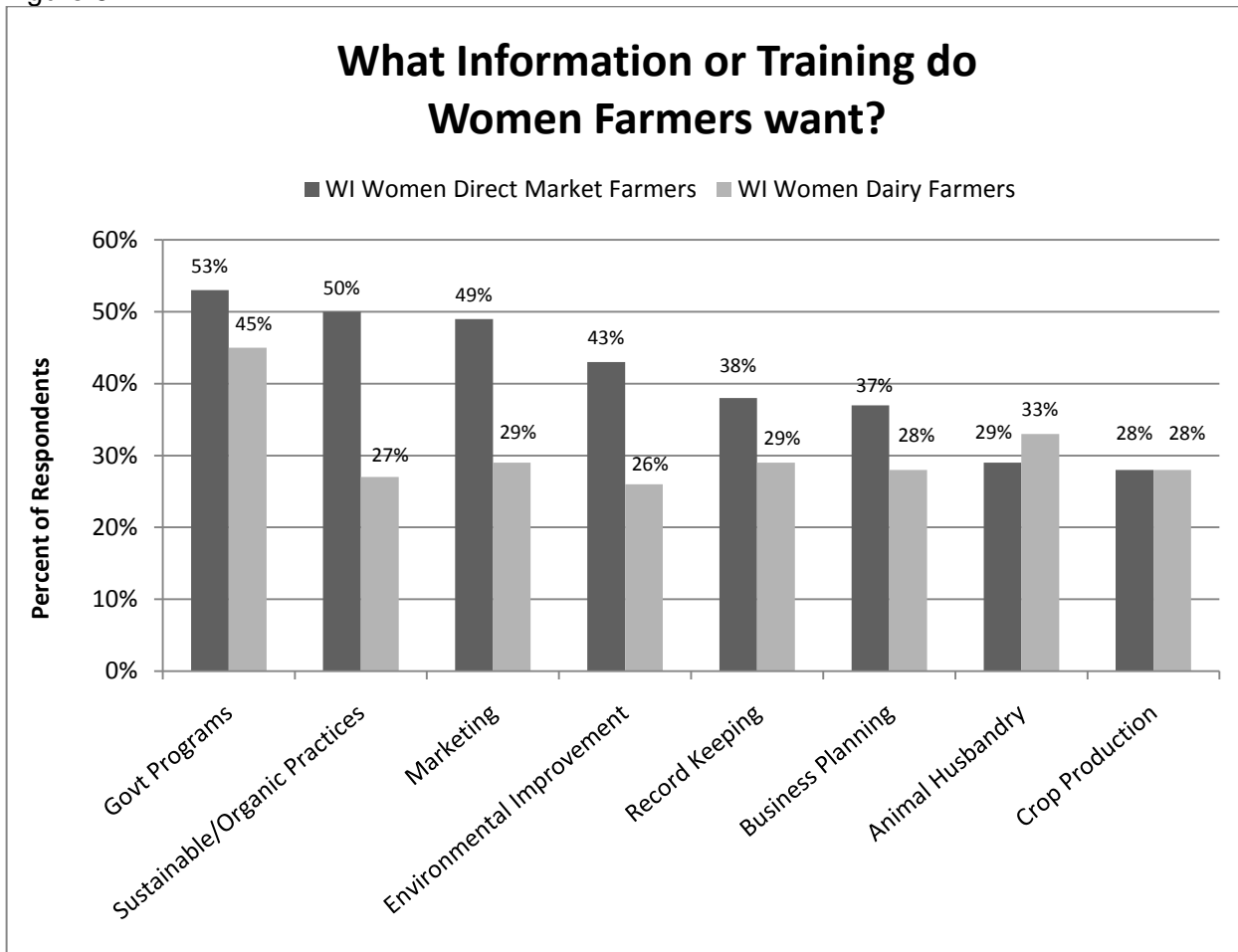
Figure 6



What Information do Women Farmers Seek?

We asked survey respondents if they wanted information or training on various topics. We supplied a list and asked respondents for a “yes” or “no” response for each topic. Figure 6 details the information needs of women farmers. Of note is that women direct market farmers report desire for information or training to a greater extent than do women dairy farmers.

Figure 6



Issues That Concern Women Farmers

The issues that concern women farmers are health care, farm profitability, work and life balance including taking care of family members, and farm energy use. Direct market farmers are concerned with whole farm management for environmental sustainability, profitability, and lifestyle. They are also concerned with marketing and feasibility planning. Dairy farmers are also concerned with herd health and farm succession. Issues of concern to women farmers are further detailed in Figures 7-10 below.

Figure 7

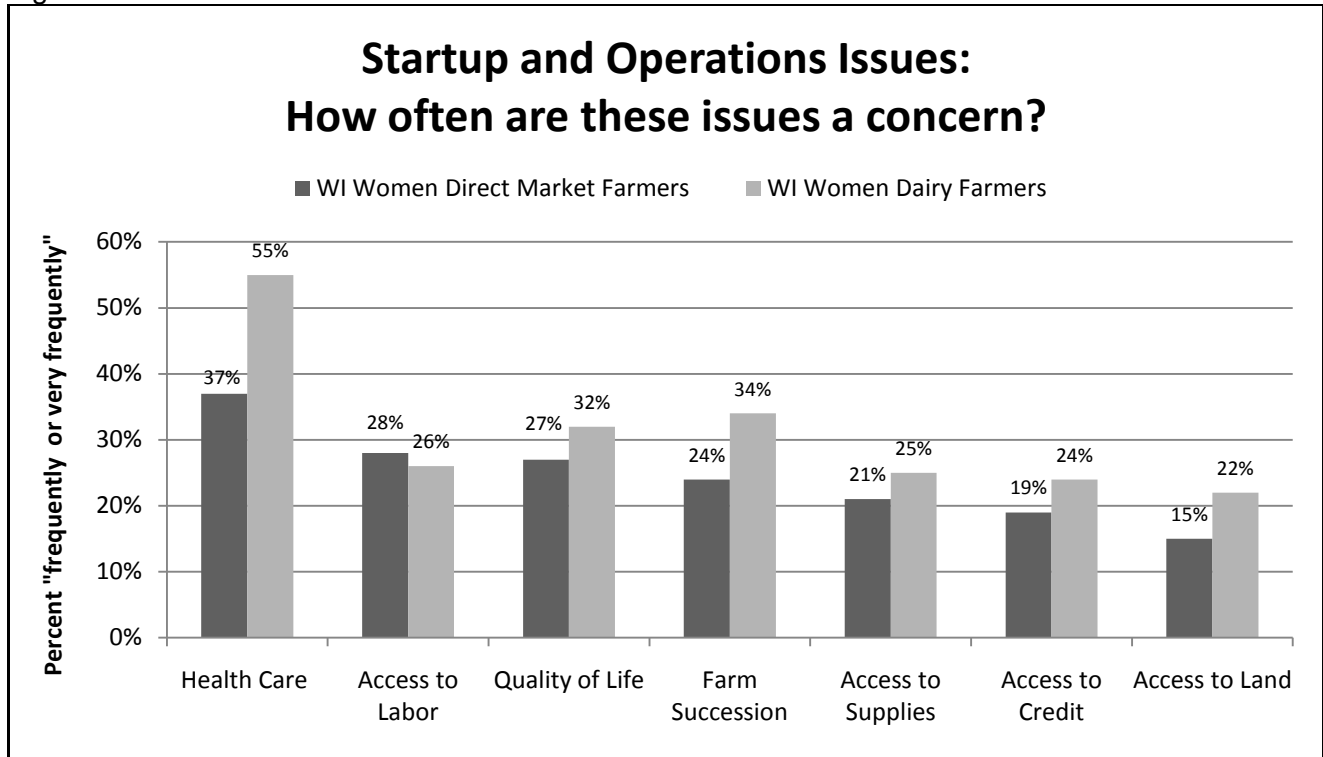


Figure 8

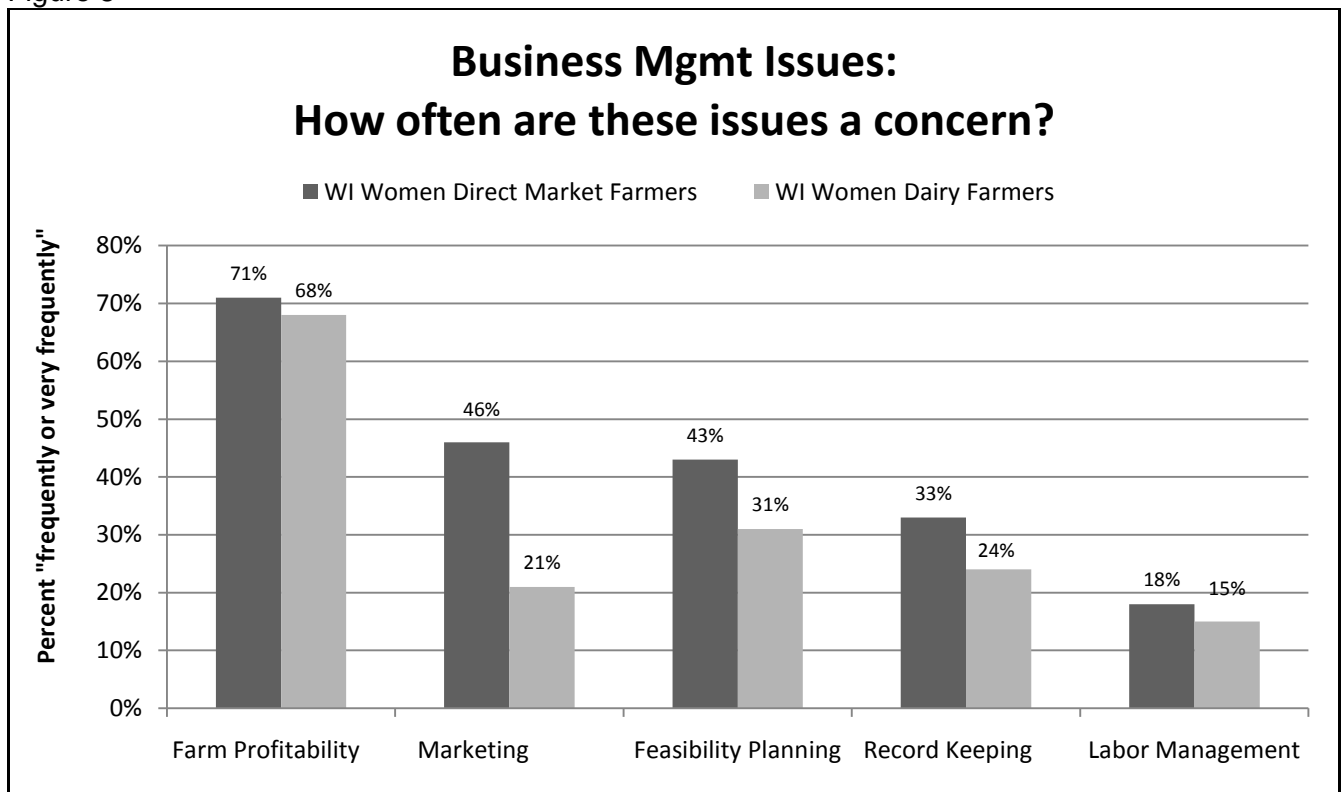


Figure 9

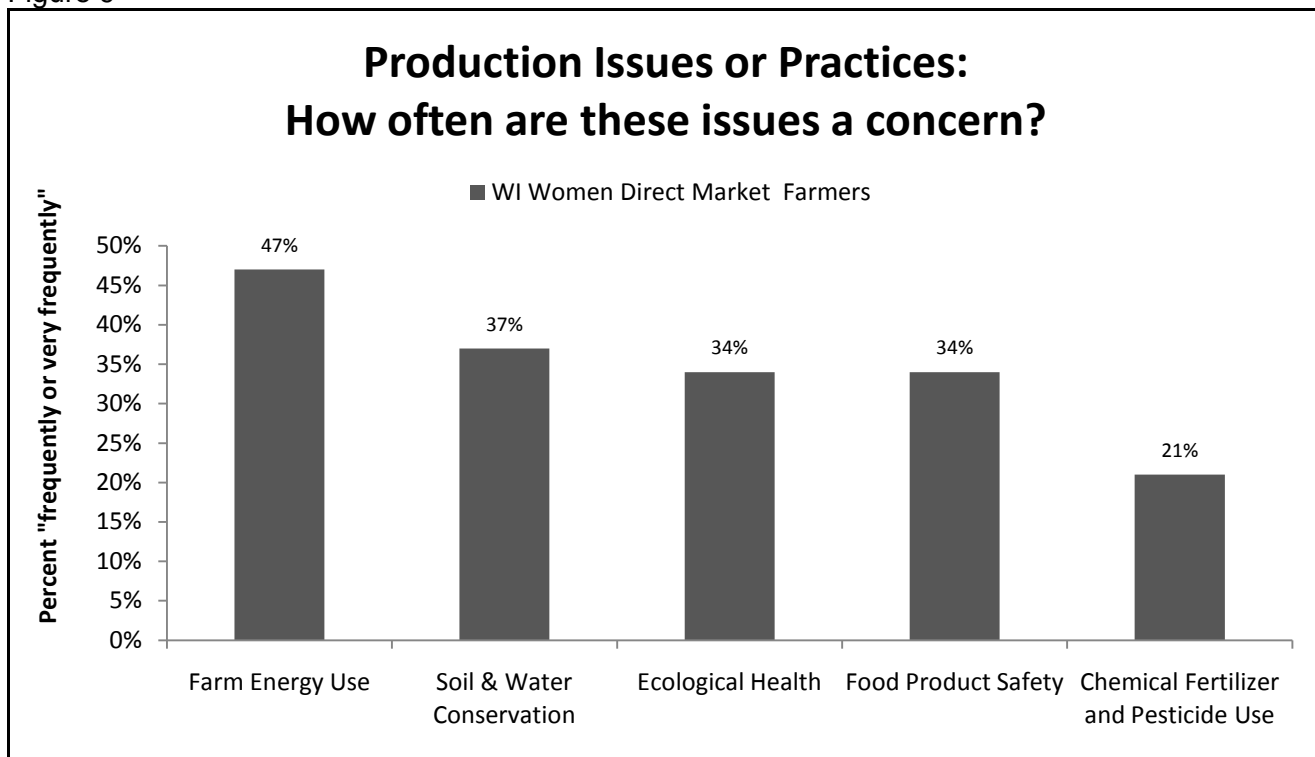
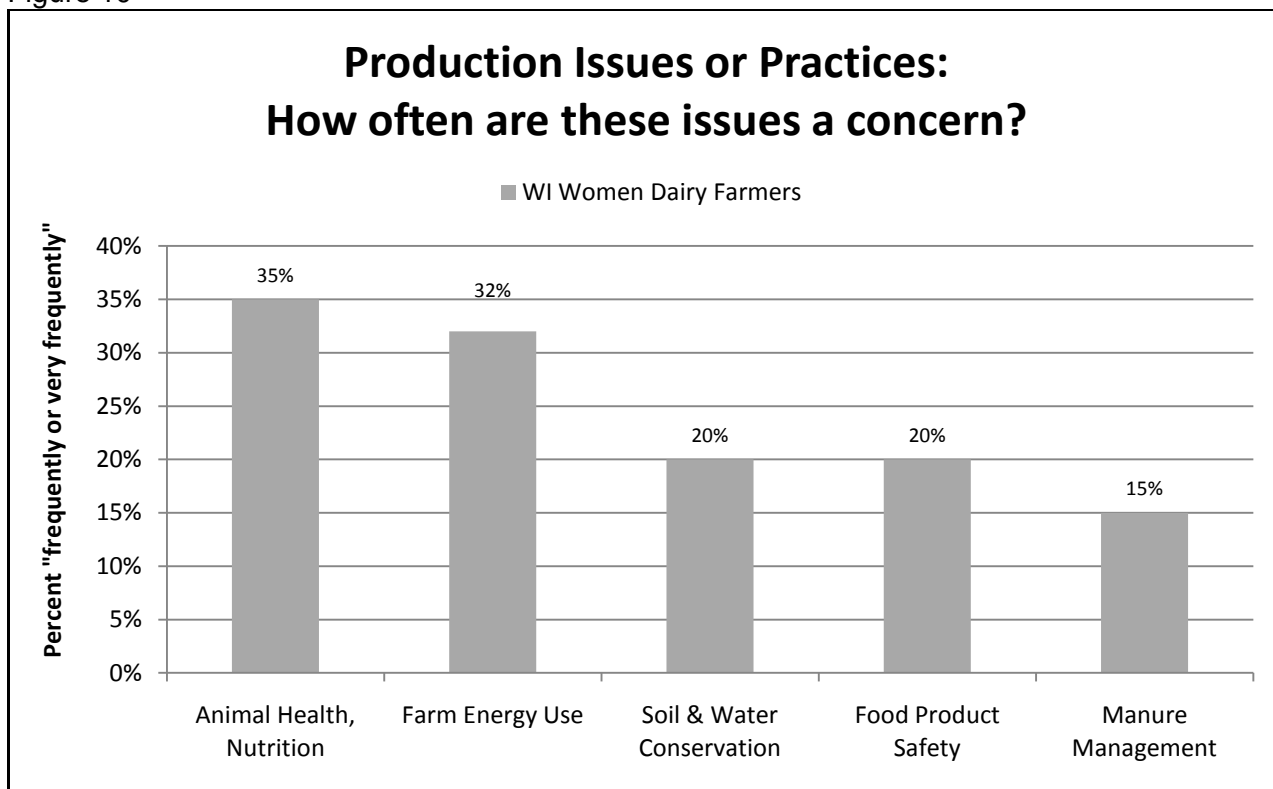


Figure 10



Challenges Specific to Being a Woman Farmer

In focus groups and interviews with women farmers, the most important and frequent challenge brought up by women farmers is being treated by others with a lack of respect for the woman as farmer. Women described being treated as though they were less knowledgeable and less responsible for making decisions than their spouses, sons, or fathers. Women farmers, either solo or in partnership with men, desire to be treated by agency personnel, implement dealers, and suppliers as informed and capable of making decisions. These authors identify the issue of respect as the main issue to be addressed in order to improve the work environment for women farmers.

Other challenges that women brought up include:

- not understanding the jargon of government programs and sometimes the technical language of farming or equipment maintenance and repair,
- problems dealing with machinery,
- difficulty getting credit or loans,
- challenges maintaining a work and family balance,
- finding time and energy to take care of children, parents, and disabled family members,
- safety of kids on the farm (primarily for dairy farmers).

How do Women Farmers Have Contact with UW-Extension?

Women farmers mentioned contacting Extension for very specific needs such as to borrow a soil probe, become a 4-H leader, attend a workshop, or take a class to write a business plan. Women dairy farmers reported seeing Extension educators at events such as Farm Technology Days and farm organization meetings and events. Women farmers who sought information from Extension expressed frustration that even if their county agent did not know the answer to a question, they wished that their agent would guide them to an expert who could respond to their inquiry.

How Can Extension and Other Agencies Improve Outreach to Women Farmers?

Reinforce a culture of respect: Extension and other agency staff will improve their work with women farmers if they can reinforce a culture of respect for the farmer as the decision maker and farm manager.

Target smaller scale farms and beginning farms: Direct market farm operations range in size and degree of capitalization, with the vast majority of these farms under 100 acres (and many between 3-10 acres). To reach farmers on smaller acreage, Extension staff must adapt educational programming and outreach methods to cater to these farmers and their enterprises. Educational programming focused on issues of value-added marketing, business management, and organic/sustainable production practices will have more appeal to these farmers than more traditional crop and animal management education.

Advertise programs through traditional and new methods: To reach women farmers, announce educational opportunities through 4-H, Family Living (nutrition), and across other Extension programs. When trying to reach Wisconsin's women dairy farmers, traditional print media outlets, such as *Hoard's Dairyman* and *The Country Today*, as well as farm radio, are effective. To reach women direct market farmers, new methods are encouraged, such as announcing programs through list-serves of other organizations to which these women are affiliated, including the Wisconsin

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Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) "Something Special from Wisconsin" program, non-profit organizations that support community supported agriculture, farmers' market organizations, the "buy local" movement, and the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES).

Use clear language: When speaking with women farmers or preparing program materials, use clear language without jargon.

Support farmer to farmer educational programming: Farmers appreciate learning from other farmers. Farmer to farmer exchange supports innovation, cooperation, and encourages a culture of respect. In focus group discussions and interviews, farmers repeatedly stressed that they would like Extension educators to serve as facilitators of farmer information exchange (through activities such as farm walks, farmer networking, new farmer mentoring, and organized tours on diverse farm operations). Farmers have a great deal to teach Extension staff and staff from other agencies, as well. Extension staff can increase their own knowledge and credibility with women farmers by inviting farmers to help teach programs.

Assist farmers with information searches by referral: Extension and other agency staff who cannot answer a farmer's question should be able to refer the farmer to another person or expert who can. Dairy farm women suggested that Extension educators can help farmers who are attempting to solve a problem or redesign features on farm (e.g., install a new milking parlor, work with different bedding materials, improve calf care) by referring them to other farmers in the region who have successfully navigated similar problems or redesign.

Improve websites: Websites for Extension and other agencies that serve farmers should be reviewed for ease of use. Extension publications are difficult to find through search engines; professional web designers should identify ways to improve how Extension documents are retrieved by search engines.

Encourage participation in programs for farm women: Although women farmers did not express a common desire for informational programming geared specifically to women, they did express a need to gather and talk with other women farmers to reduce their sense of isolation. There are many successful programs for women farmers in Wisconsin and neighboring states. We encourage Extension staff and other agency staff to make these opportunities known to women farmers and to increase their participation. Some of these programs are: Heart of the Farm (UW-Extension), Annie's Project (UW-Extension), Gathering Circles (WI Rural Women's Initiative), Connecting Threads Conference (WI Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection WIDATCP), Rural Women's Project (Midwest Organic Sustainable Educational Service MOSES), Wisconsin Farmers Union Leadership Retreat, and the Iowa-based Women, Food and Agriculture Network.