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COMMUNITY/WORLD

Women Farmers' Network Launched in Western Massachusetts

By Madeleine Charney

It was a steamy summer evening at the Whately, Massachusetts town hall when seventy-five women gathered for the first meeting of "Women in Agriculture" on July 27th. "No matter," said Mary L. Peabody, keynote speaker, referring to the nearly 100-degree weather, "we're farmers!" Her light-hearted dismissal was met with a round of laughter and the evening was off to an energized and productive start.

Earlier, the energy in the room had already been palpable as the group filed in and joined the potluck line. Fresh, local food was served up as the women perused a table laden with literature and found seats strategically arranged in clusters. Old friends greeted one another as new contacts were made with handshakes and the exchanging of business cards. Group introductions revealed a wide range of operations and experience.

THE NEED

The meeting was inspired and organized by Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA), a non-profit organization based in South Deerfield, Massachusetts. CISA's mission is to sustain agriculture by building a secure local food and farming system, strengthening relationships between consumers and farmers, increasing farm profitability, promoting environmental sustainability, preserving rural communities, and ensuring that fresh, healthy, locally grown food is available, affordable and accessible to everyone.

Therese Fitzsimmons, Coordinator for CISA's Women in Agriculture Program, oversees a community outreach project funded by the USDA's Risk Management Agency. The project includes a formal mentoring program. However, when Fitzsimmons directly queried women farmers about how CISA could assist them, she heard their repeated request for an informal counterpart, a forum in which to share hands-on learning and visit one another's operations.

"About twenty of the women farmers spoke of their positive experiences with business networks," explained Fitzsimmons. These networks provided the women with speedy and relevant answers to the questions they tossed into the ring.

It seemed like a natural step to form a network that addresses specific farming needs and allows women to gather and pool their knowledge base, and so Fitzsimmons was happy to organize this successful initial meeting. A second meeting of CISA's "Women in Agriculture" network was held on September 21st with plans for meeting every other month.

THE WAGN MODEL

As Director of the Women's Agricultural Network (WAGN) in Vermont, Peabody was a logical choice to jumpstart this new networking opportunity for women farmers in the region. WAGN, a collaborative effort of the University of Vermont Extension System, University of Vermont's Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and the USDA, provides education and technical assistance to individuals starting or enhancing farms and ag-related businesses.

WAGN offers a series of educational, technical assistance, and networking opportuni-



Mary Peabody of Vermont Women in Agriculture Network (WAGN)



Participants in the July Women in Agriculture network meeting in Deerfield, Mass.



CISA Board Chair Faye Omasta, right, chats with Therese Fitzsimmons, Coordinator of CISA's Women in Agriculture. All photos by Kelly Coleman.

ties. From developing and assessing a business idea through the advanced planning and implementation phases, WAGN offers a program to support and encourage these varying levels.

The WagN vision is to increase the number of women owning/operating profitable farms and ag-related businesses and their profile in leadership positions throughout the agricultural sectors of business, government and community. Peabody's rousing presentation provided fertile ground for the seeds of such a network in Western Massachusetts.

WOMEN FARMERS ON THE RISE

Peabody centered her talk on some remarkable statistics. "Yes, there really are more women farmers," she declared. Quoting from the USDA 2002 Census of Agriculture, she pointed out that in 1982 there were 121,599 farms and ranches with women as principal operators. Compare that with 237,819 principal operators in 2002. That's nearly a 100% increase in only twenty years! She then went on to illuminate some of the origins of these changes.

New recruits (women 18-30), mid-life career changers, and family matriarchs are on the rise. Combined with changing purchasing patterns, consumer behavior, and economic conditions, this complex scenario becomes clearer. Women's farms tend to be small (35% are between 10-49 acres), diversified, sustainable/organic, a part-time vocation, value-added, direct marketed, and less mechanized than the average farm.

Women's farms also have a larger portion of their farms in the lower sales classes than men operators. Why is this? What are

the barriers?

Peabody's research shows that setting smaller goals, limited connections, physical limitations, less confidence with tools/equipment, limited access to programs, risk aversion, and a social perception that farmers are men contribute to women farmers' lower economic gain.

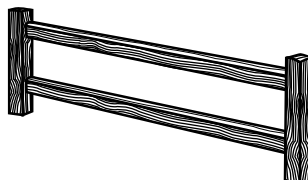
The obvious question then is how to dissolve these barriers.

The obvious answer: With networks such as WAGN and "Women in Agriculture." These networks, according to Peabody, provide a "safe" place to learn and explore, support systems, reality checks to dispel isolation, stories and information, a way to foster creativity, and a community with whom to celebrate. "Women know how to celebrate!" she reiterated. Case in point -- the smiles and conversation sustained as the women filed outside and made their way down the road for a tour of a local woman's farm.

To find out more about Women's Agricultural Network (WAGN) in Vermont, contact Mary L. Peabody at (866) 860-1382 extension x13 or mary.peabody@uvm.edu, or visit www.uvm.edu/wagn.

For more information about Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture and its new Women In Agriculture network, call the CISA office at (866) 965-7100 or visit <http://buylocalfood.com>.

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Resource Spotlight Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference Oct 21-23

The 2005 Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference will bring together farmers, educators, and activists involved in sustainable agriculture to share educational and organization strategies, build technical and business skills, and address policy issues all aimed at expanding the success of women in sustainable agriculture. The gathering, to be held in Burlington, Vermont, will work to set the agenda for the next decade of supporting women in agriculture.

- **Who?** Farmers, ranchers, growers, service providers, educators, social and political activists, and those who care about food, fiber and the natural world.

- **Why?** To honor the role of women in agriculture, to celebrate the power of women's networks to create change and to plant the seeds for future work.

- **Happenings?** A sensory feast... Speakers to capture your imagination... Workshops to engage your hands and mind... Art to delight your spirit... Networking to stimulate your creativity... Activities to nurture the child within and... Locally grown food that celebrates the bounty of the season.

Register online at www.uvm.edu/wagn/womeninag.html or by calling the Women's Agricultural Network at (802) 223-2389 ext 15.

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