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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.

“The obvious question then is how to dissolve these 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.

Women Farmers on the Rise

Peabody centered her talk on 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.

WAGN offers a series of educational, technical assistance, and networking opportunities 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 opportunities 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.

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 www.uvm.edu/wagin.

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 nurture your community... Activities to stimulate your creativity... 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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