

## Women Supporting Women: Women Only Tours Focus on Conservation and Farming Practices

by Mary Fund



*KRC sponsored three women only conservation tours and workshops from April through June in south central, northeast and north central Kansas. Above left, Marlene Bosworth, Delaware WRAPS coordinator, explains sedimentation into Perry Reservoir by pointing out streambank erosion and farming practices upstream along the Delaware River. Above right, Lucinda Stuenkel, Palmer, Ks., opened her farm for a tour of a variety of conservation and livestock management practices including a “one-woman maternity cow barn” designed for ease of management.*

Conservation measures, farming practices, and livestock management—all from a woman’s perspective as farmer and/or landowner—and lots of one on one discussion with other women farmers, highlighted the tours/workshops at KRC’s spring “Mom, Apple Pie and Conservation” tours and workshops in April-June. These featured a women-only audience, many women conservation professionals as presenters (as well as a few men), and roundtable discussions about women and agriculture. We had a wild bus tour criss-crossing gravel and dirt roads to visit a variety of conservation practices in three northeast Kansas counties. We rented vans to visit multiple Reno County farms and practices as well as a very depleted Cheney Reservoir at the bottom of the watershed. And the last tour featured multiple conservation measures all on one farm—Lucinda and Sheila Stuenkel’s woman run operation on the border of Clay and Washington counties. *Continued on page 8*

## KRC Launches Three-Year Farm to Fork Plan Initiative

On July 1, the Kansas Rural Center launched the “Community Food Solutions for a Healthier Kansas” initiative that will seek to advance our farm-to-fork food system across the state of Kansas over the next three years. The program will involve a statewide network of partners who are actively working on farm-to-fork solutions to food access for Kansans and will produce a Statewide Farm-to-Fork Plan.

Ultimately the plan will be used to recommend public policy solutions needed at all levels to increase access to healthful Kansas farm foods. The program is supported by a 3-year Statewide Partnership Initiative grant from the Kansas Health Foundation.

KRC will work closely with the Kansas Health Foundation along with the four other awardees ~ KC Healthy Kids, Kansas Action for Children, American Heart Association in Kansas, and the Kansas Hospital Education and Research Foundation. The new initiative will seek to fulfill the Kansas Health Foundation’s goal of making healthful foods the easy, accessible, and routine choice. Utilizing Kansas farms to reach this goal is KRC’s mission.

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# Sustainable Farming News

## Women and Conservation...

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The tours/workshops/learning circles drew a diverse crowd including 20-something daughters with their mothers, and 80 year-old plus widows farming with their sons or tenants. Some were traditional farm wives looking for better understanding of conservation and farming practices on their farms. Some were new landowners looking for key information on dealing with problem tenants, or soil or weed problems. Some were interested in ideas for livestock management. All appeared to like the idea of a day spent with other women who are facing similar questions and problems.

Liz Sarno, University of NE Extension Educator and small farmer who attended the June 22 tour, told me she had read that at one of the tour stops we would view a maternity barn with special stalls, designed from a woman's perspective for ease of management. "That's when I knew I had to go!" she said. "I thought of how many nights I've sat up with a cow waiting for her to calve and wishing I had a better calving facility."

The maternity barn was a highlight for many of the women who are active in the livestock management part of their farms, or who raise cattle, goats or sheep on their own. Indeed, the number of women farmers has nearly tripled over the past thirty years, with most operating small farms in the fastest growing segment of agriculture-specialty crops and livestock. The number of women landowners is also increasing, as more wives and daughters inherit the family farm.

Over the next 20 years, nearly 70% of U.S. farmland acres will change hands, and many of those new owners



*The tour stopped at the Ninnescah River on the farm of Darrin and Carmen Unruh in Reno County. Pasture land and a riparian buffer borders the river where Carmen brings her 4th grade class each year for lessons in native plants, biology and history.*

will be women. Decision making on a growing amount of America's farmland will be in the hands of women.

Thus, KRC brought together women farmers and landowners- young and old- to learn about conservation practices, new enterprise opportunities, farming practices and state and federal programs and resources to help them gain the understanding and skills to make better land and farm management decisions.

We chose the women-only format because research and experience in similar programs throughout the Midwest had shown that women are more comfortable asking questions in the women only environment. We often feel intimidated or embarrassed to ask questions in a male dominated group. We greatly appreciated the men who provided presentations or opened their farms up to the tours, but we also had a good number of women conservation professionals providing information and resources .

Each tour this spring was a bit different, and we learned something new at each one. But the primary take

away was that the majority of the women who attended wanted to have more of these workshops and tours, perhaps adding sessions on legal issues such as tenant agreements and contracts, farm transition resources, and new enterprise opportunities. Plus, of course, we were urged to continue the hands-on, in-the-field tours of conservation and farming or livestock management practices- from a woman's perspective.

KRC is seeking more funding to continue helping local conservation districts, watersheds, and others hold similar educational events in the future.

Primary funding for this series of workshops came from a sub-contract through the Center for Rural Affairs and the Women Food and Agriculture Network from the USDA NRCS CIG Program. Other support came from Kansas Center for Sustainable Ag and Alternative Crops, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, and Delaware WRAPS, and KRC. □

# Sustainable Farming News



Above left, Lucinda Stuenkel's "maternity barn" features stalls for up to four cows at a time, with head gates and swinging gates for ease of access. To the right, Roberta Spencer, Jackson County Conservation District, explains her pasture and grazing management system.



Brown County farmer David Zeit (above left) with KSU's Will Boyer, explains how he made improvements to his livestock feeding area due to pressure from regulators. He explains it was tough to accept initially, but now says his new feeding and grazing system is the best thing he's done for himself and his herd. Above right, women on the Reno Xounty tour shared stories and information during a lunch roundtable.



Above, Lisa French uses the table top rainfall simulator to show the impact of rain on different soils and covers. At right, a full bus load of women visited farms including cover crops, solar water pumps, and grazing systems.

# Sustainable Farming News

## Women Supporting Women: Tour Focuses on Women's Info Needs

by Jamie Dysart & Mary Fund

On June 22, Lucinda and Sheila Stuenkel opened their farm, located near Palmer, Kansas, on the Clay/Washington county line, for a women's conservation tour organized by the Kansas Rural Center's Women and Conservation Project. The Stuenkel farm was unique to the other tours as theirs is a woman managed farm having undergone a life-changing transition in the past three years.

Lucinda and Sheila Stuenkel took over the farm management after their husbands, brothers Daryl and Kevin, died in a vehicle accident in November 2010. On top of the sadness and grief they and their children were going through and the myriad decisions that follow such a family tragedy, the two women were left with the family farm and the immediate responsibility of 65 cows that were due to calve in January and February. Faced with these challenges, Lucinda and Sheila learned to manage the farm their own way, while staying true to the plans their husbands left behind.

As she led the morning tour, Lucinda explained that she and Sheila and their kids try to honor and follow the same path she and Sheila's husbands-- and their parents and grandparents--followed in caring for the land. Conservation and stewardship were a strong part of their operation before their husbands died, and remain so in their decision making.

Lucinda credited having gone through the KRC's River Friendly Farm Self-environmental assessment

and whole farm planning process with providing her and sister-in-law Sheila the basic farm plan that guided them in their decisions.

The planning process required the couples to write down their short and long term management goals for conservation and natural resources on the farm. According to Lucinda, the plan forced her to study the FSA field maps and understand the farm layout in a way she had not before. The assessment is designed with a series of questions that help rank conditions or problems and needed management changes. It also provided them with a timeline for what needed to be done and identified resources for accomplishing goals. (The RFFP notebook assessment is available online at the KRC website at <http://kansaruralcenter.org/tag/workbooks/>)

The challenges of that first winter without the guys to handle the calving led to many changes in the livestock management set up. "Women can't do physically what the guys had always done", Lucinda explained, using an example of how they used to lift heavy wooden gates to corner a cow. "So we had to learn how to do it smarter."

Today she has a one-woman calving barn that is the envy of her neighbors. Designed with ease of handling in mind, the barn is divided into separate pens with easy swinging gates and panels that allow for pen combinations to accommodate about every situation. A head-gate and swinging gate allows one woman or person to easily handle a cow with calving complications or a sick animal for treatment. Loading



*Lucinda and Sheila Stuenkel (foreground) hosted a farm tour that featured a variety of conservation practices.*

chutes and pens were also redesigned for ease of management and low animal stress. These improvements, Lucinda pointed out, improve safety and ease of handling for anyone handling cattle—her young teenage farm hands or an older farmer.

Lucinda said she is especially proud of being able to move a winter-feeding area out of the flood plain onto higher ground. This was done to improve water-quality, she said. "We graze cattle all year round, but we also train cattle to come into the winter-feeding site at night beginning a month before they calve," said Lucinda.

While Lucinda handles most of the livestock management, she works closely with neighbor and long time family friend Jerry Berger who farms the cropland. The Stuenkel's are conventional, dryland farmers that have adopted cover crop and no till practices. *Contd. on page 11*

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## Women's Conservation Tour

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Several years ago, after wheat harvest Lucinda's husband experimented with fall-planting oats on half of the field. The cattle did so well grazing the oats, that it led to more use of cover crops.

Lucinda, with Berger's cooperation, has increased their use of cover crops by adding purple top turnips and tillage radishes to the oats. She decided to use the tiller radishes to break-up the hard pan and scavenge excess nitrogen and other nutrients. They have experimented with millet, cow peas, brassicas, sorghum Sudan grass, soybeans, Birdsfoot trefoil, red clover, and lentils.

Like many skeptics of no till and cover crops, Berger had at first argued that the next crop would have a hard time because the cover crop would take moisture away from the cash crop. However those arguments quickly faded when they got ten bushels more per acre from the field with the cover crop. Now a cover crop of spring oats, brassicas and legumes is planted in August into wheat stubble as part of their management strategy. Cattle graze the cover crops over the winter. Lucinda also says they have reduced herbicides due to use of both cover crops and rotational grazing.

Other conservation measures on the tour included:

- Dry lots planted with crabgrass. Most people try to get rid of crabgrass but crabgrass is drought tolerant, soaks up the nitrogen from cattle manure and has deep roots, which gives structure to the soil. Plus, cattle love to graze crabgrass, said Lucinda.

- Rock check dams and rock armor along a cutback into a crop field along a stream. The rock check dams were set 30-40 feet apart and slow the water

down as it enters the stream via a waterway in the crop field, and prevents and reduces the cutting back into the field, she said.

- Alternative livestock watering site. Expired CRP pasture was fenced and a water source was added to make a rotational grazing system possible in that pasture.

Afternoon presentations from Tom Meek, Clay County Conservation District, provided cost-share program information. Dale Strickler of Star Seed, provided cover crop and soil health information. Lisa French, Cheney Lake Watershed Coordinator, demonstrated how land use impacts runoff and water quality via a table top rainfall simulator.

Organized by the Kansas Rural Center as part of their Women and Conservation Project, the purpose of the tour and workshop was to provide women an overview of conservation practices in the field, introduce them to available state and federal conservation programs, and provide a women-only environment where the women could feel comfortable asking questions and focusing on agriculture from a woman's perspective.

"There are more and more women farm operators," stated Mary Fund, KRC project coordinator, "and because women often outlive men, women end up owning a lot of farmland. The morning tour and the afternoon presentations were geared to providing some basic information on conservation practices and some time for women farmers and landowners to talk to other women farmers and landowners to share stories, questions, and experiences—and learn from each other", Fund explained. □

## Farm to Fork...

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Through KRC's past farm-to-fork work and their partners in Kansas, farms have proven to be a critical solution to food access challenges.

In the first year, statewide partners will help develop the Statewide Farm-to-Fork Plan. The plan will support awareness of the status, barriers, opportunities and policy supports needed to advance the Kansas food and farming system, with a goal of increasing Kansans access to Kansas grown and raised fresh produce, whole grains and a variety of proteins both at home and in food outlets.

The "Community Food Solutions for a Healthier Kansas" Initiative will especially focus on Kansans with known food access challenges. These are people who may not have enough to eat, are physically distant from sources of healthy food, or suffer from poor nutrition even though their refrigerators and pantries are full.

Kansans struggling with food insecurity due to distance and economic factors live in all 105 counties. Kansans consuming a nutritionally imbalanced diet comprise more than 75 percent of our total population, according to 2009 fruit and vegetable consumption data.

During the second and third years of the initiative, KRC and their partners will engage and educate citizens and statewide public policy makers to

advance the needs identified in the plan. KRC will also train regional and local leaders in community food organizing to self-assess their needs and opportunities surrounding healthy food access via local farm production.

KRC has a long history of advocating for healthy food and farm systems. Most recently, in November 2012, KRC hosted the "Healthy Farms, Healthy People: Kansas Agriculture and Health Summit," with support from the National Network of Public Health Institute and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

KRC's annual farming and food conference, scheduled for Nov. 2 at Newton, Kansas, will provide practical information for farmers seeking alternative practices, along with community food topics such as farmers markets, CSA's, coops and more, and public policy information regarding Kansas legislation and the federal Farm Bill.

More information about the progress of this initiative will be made available on the website as it develops. Visit [www.kansasruralcenter.org](http://www.kansasruralcenter.org).