

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Extension and Outreach

Success Story

Title

Annie's Project Empowers Women in Northeast Iowa

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Relevance

Agriculture is an important industry in Iowa's Fayette, Bremer and Buchanan Counties which make up Iowa State University Extension Region 10. The 2017 Census of Agriculture reported 3,285 farms in the three counties and the market value of agricultural products sold was \$966.2 M. Women are significant stakeholders in the agricultural productivity of Region 10. As of 2017, there were 1,751 women producers within the region, accounting for 31.5 percent of total producers. The 2017 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll showed women participated in record keeping and financial management at substantially higher rates than men.

Response

Meeting the needs of women in agriculture has long been a priority for Deb Kahler, Fayette County Office Manager, and the Fayette County Extension Council. In the past five years (2017 to 2021) Fayette County hosted an Annie's Project, Managing for Today and Tomorrow, Women Managing Farmland, Women in Ag Tour, and other programs. Kahler partnered with Kara Vance, Buchanan County Program Director, and Ron Lenth, Bremer County Program Director, to bring together Region 10 for the program.

Annie's Project is an 18-hour agricultural business education program that empowers women in agriculture to be successful through education, networks, and resources. Annie's Project creates a comfortable and supportive environment that allows for guest speaker appearances and group discussion. Participants enrolled in Annie's Project learn effective strategies in the five agricultural risk management areas of financial, human resources, legal, marketing, and production.

Melissa O'Rourke, Iowa State Extension and Outreach Farm Management Specialist, worked with Fayette County to lead the Annie's Project course in Oelwein, IA which began February 28, 2022. As an attorney and former college teacher, O'Rourke brings a unique perspective to her extension work. She taught the course participants about property titles and asset ownership; estate planning terms, concepts, and tools; liability protection, farmland leasing, and other legal matters. "My goal with these topics is to share information that is applicable to women of all ages and provide them with the tools to make better legal decisions for their agricultural ventures," shared O'Rourke. She brought in several guest speakers from the community on topics ranging from financial benchmarks to soil conservation. "A key part of the Annie's Project course is to help women build a local network of helpful experts and other women in agriculture," said O'Rourke.

The course was made possible through a Northcentral Extension Risk Management Education grant project supported by USDA/NIFA under Award Number 2018-70027-28586, and a statewide gift from Farm Credit Services of America.

Results(s)

- Learning Changes
- Behavior Changes
- Condition Changes

Impact Statement

The Annie's Project course in Extension Region 10 was effective in extending knowledge and empowering women. Participants in the course took important actions to reduce risk and manage the profitability of their agricultural ventures. Extension and Outreach has an important role in encouraging women as they improve business management and develop support networks. When Iowa State University extends knowledge and empowers women, all lowans benefit through expanded agricultural businesses, greater conservation of natural resources, and increased support for the community of women in agriculture. By improving agricultural sustainability, women in the industry are key stakeholders in the production of safe, plentiful, and accessible food.

ISUEO Signature Issues

Food & the Environment --> Farm Business Management

Other Results

Stories

Natalie Eick, owner of Hightail Delivery, grew up on a dairy farm in Bremer County with aspirations of taking over the family farm from a young age. In high school, she attended her first Annie's Project class with her mom, Kelly, and immediately found value in the program. Eick credits a lot of her decision making to skills she learned through extension programming.

Now as a business owner and Iowa State University graduate, Eick attended her second Annie's Project course. "I walked away with new information that will aid me in growing my business," said Eick. In the Fayette County Annie's Project course, Eick gained legal knowledge from O'Rourke that is applicable to younger people. Eick said, "I appreciated how straight forward Melissa was. She didn't sugarcoat the information and you could just tell she knew exactly what she was talking about."

Eick started Hightail Delivery in 2019 with the goal of adding value to her family's dairy farm through ice cream. She began by producing ice cream with milk purchased from Anderson Erickson Dairy (AE). Recently, she received a Dairy Business Innovation Alliance grant to help purchase a shipping container with the processing equipment she will need to utilize the milk from her family dairy.

Eick also enrolled in O'Rourke's "Expanding Farm Horizons: Early Career and Beginning Farmer Strategies" course which began on January 6, 2022 in Fayette County. She obtained a plethora of knowledge relating to beginning farmer tax credits, USDA loans, and working with lenders. In the future, Eick plans to manage the family farm and she felt both courses gave her a leg up in planning for that transition.

The programs allowed Eick to feel more confident in her involvement in on-farm conversations and the decision-making process. She enjoyed the fellowship with other participants, especially in the Annie's Project course. "Sometimes being a farm wife or daughter can feel incredibly isolating. It felt so good to get together with like-minded women to learn from and with each other," said Eick.

Susan Kuennen recently retired from her career as a staff nurse at Mayo Clinic and manages her 160-acre farm in Fayette County. After Kuennen lost her husband due to brain cancer in 2011, she enrolled in her first Annie's project course in Winneshiek County, in February of 2012. She sought out and built a team of knowledgeable supporters to assist in her farm related decisions.

Kuennen established many conservation practices on her highly erodible farm such as ponds, woodlands, and wildlife plots. Kuennen likes to be entrepreneurial. In addition to growing and marketing row crops, she also produces and markets bees and honey along with willows for basket art on her farm.

She took Annie's Project again in Fayette County in 2017, because she was interested in learning about new and different resources. Then, her connections to extension led to Kuennen serving for four years as the Fayette County representative to the board of directors at the Norman Borlaug Iowa State University Research farm.

This past spring, Kuennen participated in her third Annie's Project course. "With the constant changes in agriculture and tight margins, I need all the helpful resources available to me," she shared. Kuennen feels extension programs are very important to her and to the state of

Iowa. They offer the opportunity to connect with like-minded women farmers and to access unbiased decision-making tools and information. This is important for landowners, like Kuennen, who are striving to make improvements.

Survey Results

Of the 16 women enrolled in the Oelwein, IA Annie's Project course, 14 completed the pre-course survey and 12 completed the post-course survey. Survey responses showed 14 women owned or operated 7,776 acres of farmland. The land was located in seven Iowa counties (Buchanan, Bremer, Chickasaw, Clayton, Fayette, Jones, and Shelby) as well as in Houston County, Minnesota. There were 35.7 percent of respondents who were young producers with ten or fewer years of farming experience. Oppositely, 42.9 percent of respondents had more than 40 years of farming experience. A majority (85.7 percent) of the respondents raised row crops. Half of the women operated pastureland and raised cattle. Hog and dairy production was also represented.

Before the course, women said they were most interested in learning about farm finances and marketing. After the course, 83.3 percent of respondents chose 'estate planning,' 58.3 percent chose 'basic financial documents,' and 58.3 percent chose 'marketing' as the most valuable topics (women could select up to five topics.) 'Web Soil Survey' and 'communications styles' were the next most valuable topics.

Knowledge Gained

- Before the course, 28.6 percent of survey respondents 'knew quite a bit' or were 'completely familiar' with how my/our family expenses compare to state and/or national benchmarks. After the course this increased to 91.7 percent.
- Before the course, 50.0 percent of respondents 'knew quite a bit' or were 'completely familiar' with forms of property ownership. After the course this increased to 91.7 percent.
- Before the course, 28.6 percent of respondents 'knew quite a bit' or were 'completely familiar' with how to participate in programs or obtain loans from USDA Farm Service Agency. After the course this increased to 83.3 percent.

Actions Taken

- Before the course, 14.3 percent of survey respondents have 'completed/currently do this' or were 'in progress' on the action of compare my/our farm/ranch financial ratios to benchmarks. After the course this increased to 58.3 percent.
- Before the course, 42.9 percent of survey respondents have 'completed/currently do this' or were 'in progress' on the action of explore ways to manage price swings in the marketplace. After the course this increased to 91.7 percent.
- Before the course, 42.9 percent of survey respondents have 'completed/currently do this' or were 'in progress' on the action of review and/or update my/our cash rental/leasing agreements. After the course this increased to 75.0 percent.

Respondents reported the changes they made during the course to improve profitability:

- "Seek estimates for inputs from 3 sources"
- "Open communication with all family members"
- "Made an appointment with my attorney to review all papers/documents"
- "We are expanding, buying a new property"

Respondents shared their goals for applying what they learned in Annie's Project:

- “Utilize this information to help others, I have used the information frequently already”
- “My goal is to improve the marketability of breeding heifers and to increase production so our children will have a great start when taking over the farm...”
- “Be more comfortable with the balance sheet, how to review it and look at what the bank is looking at”

Respondents shared comments on what was the most important thing they learned:

- “EVERYTHING – it sounds cliché but I will utilize all the topics...”
- “Availability of programs through FSA and NRCS”
- “How to network with similar minds! :)”

Some examples of topics the respondents want to learn more about are: a) “marketing and options trading,” b) “benefits of setting up an LLC with the farm transfer process,” and c) “more of the bookkeeping... what is important to take or give to the tax person.”

After the course, 83.3 percent of respondents ‘strongly agreed’ the course provided ‘enough time for discussion and interaction with other participants,’ and 83.3 percent agreed the Annie’s Project women-centered environment ‘was important’ to them.

In the final open-ended question, one woman wrote, “[I] was pleased with the format of the project and all the information, thank you for putting together an excellent project.”

Location / Participant(s) Came From

- County
 - Bremer
 - Buchanan
 - Chickasaw
 - Clayton
 - Fayette

Partner(s)

- Business and Industry
- County Extension Staff