working together for a brighter future
THE PROJECT
Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC) is a three-year project providing women landowners and farmers peer-to-peer opportunities to connect and learn about land stewardship. Programs facilitate access to expert content, professional services and resources. Now 35% of Wisconsin’s primary operators are women, per the 2017 Census, an increase of 16% since 2012. WiWiC prioritizes and funds Conservation Plans to guide this increasingly important but historically underserved demographic. The NRCS-funded project is led by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, partnered with Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service, Renewing the Countryside, and Wisconsin Farmers Union. At the conclusion of Year 1, 1,337 participants were actively engaged with the newsletter and events, 2,301 were following on social media.

35% of Wisconsin’s primary farm operators are now women, according to the 2017 Census. 22% of them have been farming for 10 years or less.

REGIONAL COORDINATORS
WiWiC fosters Regional Networks of women landowners and conservation professionals to facilitate relationships that will produce results. Each Regional Network is facilitated by one of the partner organizations. Year 1, WiWiC launched four Regional Networks of tri-county clusters: Northwest, West Central, Southeast and Northeast. Southwest and North Central will be added in 2022. The tri-county regions were chosen for administrative efficiency and existing relationships with community-based organizations with a goal to reach diverse groups of women stewarding a variety of farm operations and landscapes. Five women Regional Coordinators serve these Regional Networks by organizing workshops, writing regional newsletters, and personally connecting landowners with regional professionals to write Conservation Plans for their land.

CONSERVATION COACHES
WiWiC offers individual mentoring to participants through 15 women Conservation Coaches who are farmers/landowners in the targeted counties and have implemented NRCS cost-share programs or adopted regenerative strategies on their lands. Each Conservation Coach hosts a field day on their property over the course of the project, presents during virtual trainings, and participates in media opportunities. These Conservation Coaches work closely with Regional Coordinators, enhancing the peer-to-peer learning model.

Year 1 Research Take Away:
Women really appreciate interacting with other women and doing so in a safe environment.
WiWiC Events were scheduled to start in Spring 2021, but COVID-19 forced a pivot to a virtual launch. Coordinators and Coaches quickly learned to facilitate in Zoom, and reached nearly 250 participants in 8 on-line regional Zooms during March and April alone. In addition to expert content, these workshops included virtual Learning Circle peer-to-peer networking time. Participants robustly engaged in Zoom Chat, which continued to be a hallmark of all virtual events in Year 1, archived as Resource Lists by event on the Blog.

WiWiC’s Year 1 event deliverables were for 4 Spring Workshops, 4 Field Days, and 4 Fall Workshops reaching 180 participants. However, the COVID challenge created a unique opportunity for Coordinators and Coaches to master the Zoom platform and provide far more content. The team developed strategies and best practices for creating a Learning Circle environment online, as well as offering in-person Field Days when safety allowed. As a result, 17 Zoom Events and 5 Field Days reached 1000+ participants in Year 1.

### SPRING
Regional Zoom Workshops

Content experts from NRCS, Pheasants Forever, County Land Conservation and UW Extension provided introductions to conservation topics and Regional Coordinators facilitated Learning Circle discussions. March/April, 1 1/2 - 2 1/2 hrs.

- **Northwest**: 30+28 participants
- **West Central**: 35+34
- **Southeast**: 27+26
- **Northeast**: 36+35

“Women-only space is less intimidating, thanks for providing that.”

“I want to meet other middle-aged women like me! As a farmer, I am tired of always operating in the male space.”

### SUMMER CAMP
Virtual Lunch Series

Third Thursday of May, June, July, August. Seminars were led by content experts on topics of interest that ranked highest in the Spring Regional Zoom Workshop Evaluations. Video, Chat and resources are archived on website Blog.

- Increase Pollinator Habitat: 132
- Build Healthy Soil: 135
- Restore Native Habitat: 134
- Explore Regenerative Ag.: 96

### SUMMER
Regional Farm Tour Field Days

Conservation Coaches hosted farm tour field days to demonstrate conservation practices. Programs were designed in Learning Circle format with peer-to-peer networking. Aug/Sept, 3-5 hrs.

- **Northwest**: 21 participants
- **West Central**: 47
- **Southeast**: 26
- **Northeast**: 35

### FALL
Conservation Plan Virtual Learning Circles

Rising COVID cases necessitated a return to virtual events, but these also utilized Learning Circle networking, as well as in-depth education on the use of Conservation Plans. Aug/Oct, 2 hrs.

- **Northwest**: 16 participants
- **West Central**: 18
- **Southeast**: 18
- **Northeast**: 18

### MENTAL HEALTH
While leading workshops, the team became aware of the need for mental health support among women landowners. WiWiC partnered with Chris Frakes of FarmWell Wisconsin to train team members to recognize and support women in crisis. The COMET training will be offered to all six Regional Networks in January 2022.

### EDUCATOR NETWORK
Through the efforts of WiWiC staff, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers declared the second week of July as the first “Wisconsin Women in Conservation Week.” WiWiC hosted a July 14 “Happy Hour” networking event for educators. Over 40 attended, including press.

Year 1 Research Take Away: Introductions are incredibly important for women to bond with one another and network about conservation and their properties. They are best done early in the meeting rather than late.
OUTREACH & MEDIA

WIWIC outreach began in February 2021 to promote the launch of March/April workshops. The team developed a logo and branding, designed a website, and created Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest accounts to reach a diversity of women landowners. Postcard invitations were sent directly to women landowners in the targeted regions. An aggressive schedule of press releases and press outreach leveraged Women’s History Month in March to promote WIWIC and the Spring Workshops. WIWIC had March stories on WPR, Midwest Farm Report, WEAU-TV, News8000, WSAW-TV, SpectrumTV and WBAY-TV. March features were published in state-wide ag papers and regional dailies as well as rural weeklies. Momentum in the press continued to build through Year 1, including a 3-month series on WIWIC Conservation Coaches in Agri-View May thru July. WIWIC’s media strategy relied on:
- 20hr/wk Communications Lead to create content promote events and set up interviews with bias
- Media training for all Coordinators and Coaches
- Quick response to media inquiries
- Fresh content on website blog and social media

WIWIC launched The Buzz monthly e-newsletter in July 2021 and ended Year 1 with over 900 subscribers. Open rate average is 54%. Regional Coordinators send out separate newsletters to their Regional Networks, each with a subscription of 65 to 140 members.

RESEARCH & EVALUATION

The WIWIC project includes a research and evaluation component to help the team design content and events on an ever-evolving basis, based on participant surveys. Other evaluation goals include documenting knowledge gains made by participants and tracking the number of Conservation Plans completed. The main research interest is to learn about the bonding/networking among participants relative to conservation practice implementation. Year 1 evaluation indicated that participants gained knowledge: at Spring virtual intros an average 1-point gain (on 0-10 scale), at Field Days half of participants said they learned a lot, at Fall virtual workshops an average 2.5-point gain. At the Fall Virtual Learning Circles, more than half of participants (53.1%) indicated they were VERY LIKELY to get a Conservation Plan. 37.5% indicated MAYBE.

At the conclusion of Year 1:
Five Conservation Plans were completed by WIWIC members.

"I attended several of the Summer Camp sessions and found them so inspiring that I am now planning to work with WIWIC on a Conservation Plan for my fourteen acres. I've lived on this land for seventeen years and this is my first time engaging with NRCS and doing conservation planning for my land." - Sue Nelson, Monroe

50 women are actively working with Regional Coordinators for Conservation Plans in 2022. 53.1% More than half of workshop participants said they are now very likely to procure a Conservation Plan. 37.5% of participants said maybe after attending a workshop.

Year 1 Research Take Away: 72% of women at Field Days felt they were helped by networking with people they’d like to interact with again. 73% feel more supported now.