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10:49 AM

Women are playing a more active role than ever in sustainable agriculture and the sustainability field overall, in Wisconsin and elsewhere.

Several of those women gathered at the Organic Valley Country Fair recently in a forum called "Planting fresh seeds: How women are transforming sustainability."

"The USDA reported a 30 percent increase in women-owned farms," said Lisa Kivirist, a Kellogg Food & Society Policy Fellow who headed the forum. "Many of these women are in their 40s and 50s, and farming as a second career. They often have roots in agriculture and are returning to them."

Not all have the roots in farming though. For example, Kivirist and her husband, John Ivanko, were involved in advertising in Chicago and decided they wanted to make a change.

Kivirist runs a farm with her husband, south of Monroe. They also run the Inn Serendipity Bed and Breakfast on the farm. It is completely powered by renewable energy and recently was named one of the "Top Ten Eco-Destinations in North America."

The inn is named, in part, because of what Kivirist refers to as the "serendipitous diversification" that has been a key to her progress in building a sustainable business and lifestyle. When things have happened, she has adapted.

"For example, when our laundry kept getting blown off the line, we said, 'it's windy here' and decided to put in wind power," she Kivirist said.

Sustainable agriculture is a natural for women in several ways, Kivirist said. Women across the U.S. are the main food purchasers. Globally, women raise more than 80 percent of the food, while owning in many countries less than 1 percent of the land.

Aimee Witteman used her roots in central Wisconsin to build a career in sustainable agriculture policy. She recently served as executive director of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition in Washington D.C. and was extensively involved in the 2008 Farm Bill debate.

"If you're interested in connecting humans with nature, agriculture is a natural," said Witteman, who has returned to the Midwest. "Public policy can be a step toward becoming one with place. We have work to do on those policies."

Witteman, who now is with the McKnight Foundation, mentioned MOSES (Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service) as a good organization for sustainable public policy advocacy. Kivirist serves as the director of the MOSES Rural Women's Project and maintains the Women, Food & Agriculture Network (WFAN).

"There are a growing number of good resources out there for women who want to become involved in sustainability," Kivirist said.

Not all women involved in sustainability are farming. Sonya Newenhouse runs the Madison Environmental Group and Community Car. The former serves as a consulting firm for people involved in all types of sustainability projects. The latter now includes 1,300 members and 18 cars. Members share those cars, and in many cases do not own their own automobiles.

The group also is getting into the building industry with NewenHouse, which will provide super-insulated homes for people who want "to live lightly on the earth." The homes will range from a one bedroom accessible 600 square feet to a three-bedroom, two-bath, 1,100 square foot home using passive house principles. NewenHouses will not need central heating, even in winter.

"You have to be open to opportunities, and to taking risks (to start a sustainable business),' Newenhouse said. "You have to decide what is the worst thing that could happen and can I live with it. You have to deal with your pride, and the fear of failure."

The Madison Environmental Group has worked on the Western Technical College Safety Building, the Madison Children's Museum LEED Project for the renovation of a North Hamilton Street building, a Green Bay Metropolitan Sewerage District project and others across the state.

Women-owned businesses are growing at almost twice the national rate, according to the Center of Women's Business Research, and women make up the largest, fastest-growing group purchasing farms today.

According to a National Agricultural Statistics Service census, women were the principal operators of more than 9,100 farms in Wisconsin. The state ranked among the top 10 states in the country for farms operated by women.

Kivirist uses the term "ecopreneuring" and, in fact, has co-authored a book with her husband on that very topic, along with another book called, "Rural Renaissance."



By **Gregg Hoffmann**

