

Women's Networks and Farm Entry In British Columbia



There are many challenges facing new entrants into agriculture. Within the sector 56% of farmers under the age of 35 work off the farm, and half of those work more than 40hrs off-farm/week. These statistics indicate a sector in decline for the average farmer. However, research on women entering the sector both via farm start-up and farm transfer in British Columbia indicates that some of these farmers are nonetheless fighting the odds and establishing themselves as farm operators.

Research was conducted between July and November 2005 as part of my MA thesis. 33 in depth interviews were performed and five case studies developed. The latter consisted of one to two weeks spent living

and working alongside the women. In order to be included in the research the women had to be managing the farm – whether on their own or with a partner or family member. They also had to have started running the farm within the past ten years, and within the past five years to be included as a case study.

The research showed that various elements have contributed to the successful transition into farming for the women. Beyond dedication and hard work, the most significant factors in mediating the various challenges the women faced were strong networks. These networks resulted in both significant affective or emotional support and practical/material support. In order to analyze the effects of the networks three main

categories of networks were identified.

Firstly, family to farmer networks were amongst the strongest forms of support the women could rely on. Whether in terms of moral support, financial backing, or the contribution of labour, women with strong family networks benefited greatly.

Secondly, farmer to farmer networks played an important role. Farmers offer assistance to new farmers in a wide variety of ways including: apprenticeship programs, sharing of knowledge both formally and informally, renting land for farm start-up, and forming farming cooperatives or other formal alliances between different generations of farmers. Again, these networks are very significant in terms of getting the farm off the ground.

Finally, community to farmer networks also provided a strong base from which farmers could establish themselves and excel. For example, consumers showed their support in multiple ways from religiously returning to buy a farmer's products to verbalizing their appreciation for the farmers hard and valuable work. Other forms of community support included: volunteers who lessen the workload

Continued overleaf...

IN SITES

and allow the farm to develop further, and the purchasing of shares of farm cooperatives that allow for the farmer to gain access to land.

These research findings indicate that one of the most significant factors that could increase the number of women successfully entering agriculture would be to further develop the various networks. The research, however, also indicated that support was frequently not the *raison d'être* of the networks. Enhancement of the networks must be holistic in nature. Policies which target only those areas where support is focused may actually undermine the ability of the networks to result in support.

There are several ways in which policy can support these networks. Firstly, mechanisms and infrastructure can be developed that enhance rather than deter the provision of resources within informal networks such as flexible taxation policies.

Secondly, opportunities for exchange need to be properly funded. These

could include training and apprenticeship programs, local farmer exchanges, common-interest organizations etc.

Thirdly, recognize the value of and enhance farmer – community relationships. For example, promoting local farm products can enhance both tourism and local development.

There are also many ways in which members of civil society can contribute to the success of the women's operations. These include:

Buying direct from the farmer at farmer's markets, through farm gate sales, CSAs (weekly vegetable baskets), or through farmer-chef alliances assures that more money goes directly to the farmer. Furthermore,

my research indicates that more women are getting into alternative types of production which are frequently sold direct.

Buying local which supports farmers from your region as opposed to very large scale and established farms from elsewhere throughout the world.

Valuing your farmers. This can be done by recognizing the social and environmental services that farmers provide. This can be done by paying more for your food, or supporting farmer led initiatives. It can also include actively working towards protecting agricultural land.

Becky Lipton, MA
Concordia University



The New Rural Economy Project, Phase 2
Tel: (514) 848-2424 ext. 2323
Fax: (514) 848-2322
E-mail: reimer@vax2.concordia.ca
Website: nre.concordia.ca

