28th Nebraska Women in Agriculture Conference

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**28th Nebraska Women in Agriculture Conference**

**Communicating in Challenging Times** was the theme of the 28th Nebraska Women in Agriculture (WIA) Conference, February 21-22, 2013 in Kearney, NE – and challenging was certainly the keyword this year! A blizzard on the opening day of the conference created challenges not only for conference organizers but also for the more than 65 speakers and booth sponsors, as well as the 425 registered participants. With roads closed and impassable around Kearney, nearly 30 of the speakers and booth attendees were still able to make it to the event. This annual conference is hosted by the Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Nebraska Extension and the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR).

The most impressive statistic of the conference was that even with a raging blizzard forecast there were still 198 people that made the trip to Kearney, most looking forward to the opportunity of being snowed in surrounded by friends and colleagues; all the while discussing issues important to them as Nebraska agricultural producers. Even with the impending weather, attendees were from all corners of Nebraska as well as Colorado, Texas and New Jersey. The scheduled keynote speaker, Jolene Brown, Family Communication Specialist of West Branch, IA was unable to make it, although word has it that she will be making an appearance at the 2014 Conference! The scheduled capstone speaker, Temple Grandin of Fort Collins, CO joined us by telephone. The change in speakers provided us with the opportunity to hear from Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel, UNL Extension Community Development Specialist. She provided a very engaging discussion on why every resident in rural communities needs to care about recruiting new residents to their areas. Cowboy poet R.P. Smith of Broken Bow provided the Thursday evening program with his entertaining interpretation of life in rural Nebraska.

Originally, over 30 speakers were scheduled to present workshops during the two-day conference. Many were still able to attend and even filled in “on-the-spot” for other
presenters unable to attend. For the participants, each session was filled with surprise as they wondered which workshops would actually be held and what the “unadvertised” workshops would be. The seventy-five minute workshop sessions included Grain Marketing 101, Horse Psychology, Farm Bill Update, Climatology and Drought, Farm/Ranch Bookkeeping, Technology Updates, Beef Nutrition and Drought, Personality and Communication, Pasture Management, Beginning Farmer/Rancher, The Water Optimizer, Livestock Marketing and “Your Health and Cancer.” The WIA Conference wouldn’t have happened without the help of these speakers and the hours of dedication from UNL Ag Economics Department secretary, Sandy Sterkel and student intern Liz Zoucha.

Of the 2013 participants, 13.9 percent were under age 30; 17.5 percent age 30-39; 18.6 percent age 40-49; 31.7 percent age 50-59; and 18.3 percent were 60 and over. The majority of attendees had attended at least six conferences, and one person had attended every conference since 1985. The College of Agriculture Sciences and Natural Resources sponsored 14 students to attend the entire conference this year.

Other interesting statistics show that of those attending the 2013 conference, 47.8 percent are employed off the farm themselves and 23 percent have a spouse working off the farm. Of those attending, they are responsible for 189,000 acres of cropland and 32,000 head of livestock.

The Women in Agriculture Program is committed to providing opportunities for all Nebraskans to develop management skills in every facet of agriculture by providing leadership, learning support and networking avenues. The main goal of the conference is to heighten participants’ skills and knowledge and provide them with the information and awareness they will need to take back to their agricultural operation. Many women report that they take the information gained from networking, concurrent workshop sessions and the keynote speakers back to their farm or ranch and review it with their partners. Together they evaluate and decide if they will implement any changes in their operation.

On a scale of one (little change) to five (substantial change), participants reported a 4.58 change in their knowledge on specific topics, a 4.05 change in enhancing their skills and abilities, and an attitude change of 4.22. Attendees also reported their interest in various agricultural topics at 4.45, and they want to know much more. Their confidence level using this information and knowledge was reported at 4.35.

The Women in Agriculture program has had a profound impact on the lives of many women and agricultural operations in Nebraska over its 28 years. Many have commented that business and estate planning, as well as tax updates are issues they must tackle with their partners and family members.

Comments heard about the conference were:

- “I intend to create a web presence for my value-added business.”
- “I can now make a more informed, educated decision on crop insurance.”
- “We need to use our computer and technology more efficiently to help us make better decisions.”
- “I need to step up and become more involved in our farm business.”
“I will take better care of my health.”
“We will be making a better marketing plan.”
“We will soon be visiting with the in-laws about our future plans for our farm.”
“Work smarter rather than harder!”

It has become vitally important that Nebraska producers tell their agricultural story to those who don’t understand our way of life and our concern for our livestock and the land we raise our families on. More and more consumer groups are challenging the dedication Nebraska producers have to the agriculture industry. The Nebraska Women in Agriculture program will continue to partner with Commonground, A-FAN and other commodity groups to encourage women to “Tell Their Own Story.”

Almost everyone said they hoped to be back next year! In upcoming months, focus groups will be held in each extension district with current and past participants and Extension Educators to establish priorities and topics for upcoming conferences. We will continue to work with Nebraska’s agricultural women and help them with their Communication In Challenging Times! Plans are already underway for the 2014 conference, which will again be held in Kearney, NE, February 20-21. For more information on the recent conference and the Women in Agriculture program see our webpage, http://wia.unl.edu, like us on Facebook, www.facebook.com/NebraskaWIA, and on Twitter, @nebraska.wia.

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