

# REACHING WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: A GUIDE FOR VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT



Photo by Preston Keres, USDA

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**T**his guide brings together information, tips and tools to deliver effective and engaging online (and hybrid) education for farm and ranch women on topics related to farm viability, resilience and conservation.

While COVID-19-related restrictions issued in 2020 that curbed in-person gatherings were the impetus for developing this resource, online offerings can help address barriers—travel time and costs, and conflicts with farm, family and off-farm employment—many women may encounter when trying to access in-person education. As such, the strategies, practices and lessons learned from this shift to online engagement will be applicable well beyond the global pandemic.

This guide was developed through a partnership between American Farmland Trust and University of Vermont Extension. (See the last page.)

## Intended Audiences

This guide is intended for practitioners such as nonprofit staff, Extension agents, farmer educators and facilitators who have prior experience conducting face-to-face education with women farmers and ranchers, and who want to transition programs online. It also provides information that will assist people who are new to offering programs for women farmers, ranchers and farmland owners.

The guide is broken up into several discrete sections, allowing you to read it from beginning to end or to jump in to focus on the topics most relevant to your learning needs.



Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust

## Gendered Focus

The guide incorporates both the characteristics of high-quality programs for women in agriculture and the emerging best practices for adapting farmer education and networking events to virtual platforms. It shares innovative approaches and lessons learned from our efforts and the efforts of our partners to engage women in agriculture under the social distancing requirements associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Framework

This guide first reviews some of the challenges and opportunities that come with the decision to use online technology to engage farmer learners and then describes how to select technology tools that align with your learning goals and objectives. We then describe how women-centered learning spaces can reflect best practices in adult learning. The guide goes on to offer ideas, tips and resources for the three phases of an online event:

- pre-event (planning)
- event
- post-event

We have also included vignettes from programming delivered during 2020 that highlight these principles and help bring these lessons to life. Finally, we provide a toolkit of resources that facilitators can use

to navigate specific practical and technological aspects of adapting for online engagement.

## Limitations

It's critically important to recognize that many Americans lack access to the kind of reliable, high-speed internet that is needed to fully participate in online education and networking opportunities. At the writing of this guide a solution to this issue has not been discovered, but several local work-

arounds are being implemented, including the use of technologies that are compatible with smartphones and cell networks, workspaces in libraries, hotspot check-outs from local organizations and programs that provide computers for those in need, such as PCs for People. These challenges should be considered at the outset of online engagement planning, and local communities should be consulted to help design programming that will enable adequate and equitable access for all women.

### THE LEARNING CIRCLE MODEL

Throughout this guide, you'll hear a lot about online engagement of women in the context of Learning Circles. American Farmland Trust's Learning Circle model (<https://farmland.org/learning-circles-for-women-landowners>) arose out of early partnerships with the Women Food and Agriculture Network's Women Caring for the Land™ program, which has been developed and tested, and ultimately proven effective, as a way to specifically engage women landowners and producers in conversations about land management, particularly regarding agricultural best management practices for soil health and water quality.

With no visible hierarchy at these gatherings, everyone is ensured of the security and value of their input to the discussion. Experts are encouraged to communicate their information without slideshows, and hands-on, interactive demonstrations (potentially via prerecorded or live-streamed digital versions) and in-depth discussion are encouraged.



# Getting Started With Online Learning

There are many different options for delivering online outreach, from social media and streaming video to web meetings, webinars and multi-session online courses. Selecting the right platform and approach begins with thinking through your outreach and educational objectives.

Consider the following questions before planning an event:

## Goals

- What do you want the group to learn and/or accomplish?
- What is the overall change you're working toward?

## Audience

- What cultural, regional, racial or ethnic considerations need to be considered?
- What motivates participants to attend? What takeaways do they want?
- What do they already know/believe? What are their barriers to participation?

## Logistics

- What is the size of the group?
- How many sessions will there be and what is the overall duration of engagement with your program?
- Does a virtual model enable you to include speakers who would normally be hard to get to an in-person event?

## Equity

- Does a virtual approach bias content towards certain audiences over others? Are there ways to overcome this?
- Is there a way that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) women or communities might not feel welcome in the virtual space we are creating? Consider the same question for women who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ).

## Inclusion

- Who might be left out by moving to a virtual platform?
- Whom might a virtual event provide additional opportunity for?
- Will there be ways to bring folks into the



Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust

planned event/experience if they don't have internet connectivity?

The answers to these questions will help you decide both on the technology and on the facilitation and instructional methods that are well suited to meet your goals.

## Challenges With the Online Approach

When approaching online program design, there may be a tendency to assume that the internet is a democratic public space where race or class or geography don't exist.

Unfortunately, the internet isn't a racial utopia, and many "utopian hopes for the internet as a space that transcends racism" are largely a byproduct of early web users being primarily white, as there continues to be segregated uses of online spaces (and access issues as laid out in the limitations section above) by different racial groups based on where people feel safe or seen (Kanjere 2019). Much as we seek to create safe online spaces for women in our outreach, we have to acknowledge that BIPOC women may not feel safe in those same spaces unless organizers take a critical approach to think-

ing about how whiteness informs their organizational approach. Indeed, Nakamura and Chow-White (2012) argue that no matter "how digital we become, the continuing problem of social inequality along racial lines persists."

Further, those who lack access to broadband internet, including many rural farmers and ranchers, are also at a disadvantage in accessing online content, and therefore we acknowledge that there is "a digital divide in racially determined access to online spaces," (Nakamura 2012) and that, more generally, broadband access is a space of growing inequality along intersecting lines of gender, race/ethnicity, rurality, income, education and age (Tolbert 2006). In rural areas, according to the FCC, about 65% of residents have access to high-speed fixed internet service, compared to about 97% of Americans living in urban areas (FCC 2020). And on Tribal lands, fewer than 60% of residents have access (FCC 2020). Nationwide, racial minorities are less likely to have broadband service at home. For example, 67% of Black and 61% of Latinx households had broadband, compared to 79% of white households, according to the Pew Research Center.



We also had to learn the ins and outs of the Zoom platform, ensure security via registration, build curriculum appropriate to the online setting, and test out how to play videos within Zoom meetings to replace the hands-on components of in-person events.

—Caitlin Joseph,  
American Farmland Trust

While online offerings are an important way to continue farmer education and networking when in-person meetings are impossible, and while they may provide access for some people who could not attend in-person gatherings, they may remain beyond the reach of underserved audiences for whom information, skill development and networking could have critical impact. While our work here does not contend with these issues explicitly, we feel it's important that they guide the way we think about putting on online events, particularly because mainstream agricultural and ranching spaces (and resources) are typically



A soil health workshop held remotely via Zoom. Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust

dominated by white people and are infused by a culture of whiteness given the legacy of agricultural land ownership (Horst 2019).

We encourage organizers to take an equity lens to their programming, including their online work. To this end, you may need to think of additional issues when organizing your events, including whether you want to or can provide interpretation resources for participants whose language

is not the dominant language used in the online event. This also might require you to seek out new partners who are embedded in communities you're trying to reach to be partners in the co-production of your events so that they truly meet the needs of the target audience. We recommend engaging with this work with great humility and compassion, as well as with earnest commitment.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES		
	LEARNING GOAL	INDICATORS
<p>We encourage you to take the time to develop learning objectives that identify specific and measurable ways to understand what learners will be able to do as a result of participating in your program. Many times, this is not an easy task, but it pays off in several important ways, especially in a virtual environment. It helps you focus the design of your program both in terms of format and content to achieve those core learning goals. Well-crafted <b>learning goals</b> include both the objective and an <b>indicator</b> that the goal has been met. Here are some example learning goals and indicators.</p>	<p>Participants will adopt approaches that other farm women have found successful for having family conversations about farm succession planning.</p>	<p><b>End-of-session indicator</b> Participants <b>identify</b> at least one approach they heard about in the session that they plan to try in the next six months.</p> <p><b>Follow-up indicator (at six months)</b> Participants report <b>using</b> at least one approach they heard about in the Learning Circle.</p>
	<p>The Learning Circle will foster supportive connections between participants.</p>	<p><b>Post-event indicator</b> Participants list two people from the Learning Circle whom they plan to continue to communicate with over the next 12 months.</p> <p><b>Follow-up indicator (at 12 months)</b> Participants report <b>ongoing contact</b> via email, phone, social media or face-to-face visits with at least one person from the Learning Circle.</p> <p><b>Follow-up indicator (at 12 months)</b> Participants describe these interactions in positive language.</p>

## Tools and Technology

This section provides information on what technological tools you might utilize to meet the goals and objectives you laid out during the planning phase. Also, see the discussion on using technology to optimize virtual sessions in “Toolkit Resources.”

The technological platforms for hosting virtual gatherings are constantly evolving and improving, so these recommendations are by no means comprehensive. Rather, we provide a few tips on which platforms have worked well for women in agriculture programs in 2020. Many tools mentioned here can also be combined and integrated across platforms to enhance the user experience.

WHEN YOU NEED TO ...	... LOOK FOR A ...	... SUCH AS:	CONSIDERATIONS
Capture input before and between meetings	form builder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Google Forms</li> <li>» Microsoft Forms</li> <li>» 1000minds</li> <li>» Poll Everywhere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Branded versus generic</li> <li>» Anonymous versus individualized</li> <li>» Need for visualization</li> </ul>
Gather and interact in real time (e.g., Learning Circles, collaborative meetings)	meeting platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Zoom</li> <li>» Microsoft Teams</li> <li>» Stormz</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Security versus convenience</li> <li>» Polling and chat functions</li> <li>» Breakout functions</li> <li>» Registration functions</li> </ul>
Deliver in-depth information but not necessarily get in-depth feedback from the audience (e.g., a webinar or lecture)	webinar platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Zoom</li> <li>» GoTo Webinar</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Cost</li> <li>» Security</li> <li>» Level of interaction</li> </ul>
Show a process, demonstrate an outcome or provide hands-on experience (e.g., a workshop, farm tour, field experience or demonstration)	livestream platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Zoom (live or pre-recorded)</li> <li>» Facebook Live</li> <li>» Instagram Live</li> <li>» StreamYard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Web-based comfort among participants</li> <li>» Cost</li> <li>» Security</li> </ul>
Engage participants during meetings and webinars	interactive collaboration tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Mural</li> <li>» Icebreaker</li> <li>» Google Jamboard</li> <li>» Miro</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Web-based comfort among participants</li> <li>» Cost</li> <li>» Security</li> </ul>
Host ongoing networking or long-term online learning	networking platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Mighty Networks</li> <li>» Higher Logic</li> <li>» Google Classroom</li> <li>» Social media groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Facilitation needs</li> <li>» Ongoing support</li> <li>» Curating and managing conversation</li> <li>» Dealing with conflicts</li> </ul>
Provide live interpretation	interpretation add-ons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Zoom (translation audio channel available with business account)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Cost</li> <li>» Number of languages</li> <li>» Number of people needing interpretation</li> </ul>



# The Benefits of Women-Centered Spaces for Effective Learning

One of the reasons to create women-focused and women-only events, virtual or otherwise, is to establish a comfortable space for woman-identifying individuals to find and access resources, information and networks that they typically don't have easy access to in the agricultural services world.



Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust

The goal of this effort is to define a space for women to learn from one another and gain confidence, rather than to be about excluding men. Many women who have participated in women-focused events report being able to find their voice in a space created for them. This can allow them to show up more fully than in spaces in mainstream agricultural events (both virtual and in person), which tend to be male dominated. One of the challenges we can face with this

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Though not a perfect replacement for in-person learning, these virtual gatherings are providing a lifeline for many women who are feeling a bit isolated right now. We've started to see that these gatherings can be an antidote to that isolation, a salve for the open wounds between struggling farmers and the agencies meant to support them, and a necessary infusion of interdisciplinary learning to drive the resilience our farmers will need.

—Caitlin Joseph,  
American Farmland Trust

approach is feedback from men who are spouses or farming partners who may feel excluded from the conversation. However, when we can clearly describe the benefits of creating an intentional space for women in agriculture, we find that most men get on board with the idea. With the increase in the actual number of women farmland owners and operators, and with the grow-



Photo by Sebastian Meyer



The networking and conversations amongst participants and resource providers have been even more open than in person. We have had smaller groups, and they are from all areas of the country, so perhaps that extra bit of anonymity is encouraging. I have always heard that it doesn't matter how many people you have at an event as long as you have the right people. The women who have participated have definitely been the right women. They come from every type of background: farm owners, operators, absentee, organic, conventional, beginning—everything. However, they still want to help each other, encourage each other and listen to each other. In four years of Learning Circles, the virtual sessions have been the most rewarding. —Ashley Brucker, American Farmland Trust

ing recognition of their importance as such, these women-oriented spaces are likely to be both more accepted and, in some cases, less necessary as women take on new leadership roles in agriculture.

## Best Practices for Adult Learning

When the situation warrants women-oriented programming, it's critical to integrate best practices for adult education oriented towards creating meaningful learning experiences for women farmers, ranchers and landowners.

In their 2021 publication *Sustainable Agriculture Through Sustainable Learning: An Educator's Guide to Best Practices for Adult Learning*, Sandy Bell and Janet McAllister identify five best practices for adult learning that have particular relevance to programs for education oriented to farm and ranch audiences. They are:

- Make content relatable
- Engage positive emotions
- Give learners choice
- Identify mental models
- Provide opportunities for practice and application

We hope you can take some time to review *Sustainable Agriculture Through Sustainable Learning*. It provides many easy-to-digest insights into the brain science behind adult learning, strategies to help educators design successful programs and a slew of practical suggestions for operationalizing these best practices before, during and after events. Please note that these principles are integrated into the rest of this publication in ways that reinforce key points. Where applicable, we refer to *Sustainable Agriculture Through Sustainable Learning* (Bell and McAllister 2021) for further details on the best practice.



Photo by Preston Keres, USDA



# Organizing Your Event

## Pre-Event: Designing Your Event

Female brains, according to some studies, tend to be well adapted to making connections between analytical reasoning and intuitive processes (Ingallhalikar 2014). Additionally, farm and ranch women bring a wealth of experience to learning events: On average, they are over the age of 50, have diverse on- and off-farm work experience, and their identities encompass a variety of life roles.

Learning Circles, whether online or in person, provide a rich environment for the kinds of conversations that allow participants to build on existing connections to integrate new information and knowledge.

In the Women for the Land Learning Circles, introductions of each participating individual are used both as a way for all participants to get to know each other and to situate knowledge and expertise so that participants can learn from one another and integrate information from technical experts.

It can be more challenging to provide those kinds of learning experiences in single-session online offerings such as webinars or meetings. Especially when a technical expert is presenting, there can be a strong temptation to fill a session with as much information as possible. Some strategies for providing learners creative ways to assimilate the information include:

- Use breakout sessions to allow for small-group conversations about some aspect of the presentation.
- Provide a short (30–60 seconds) “reflection” break during which learners respond



Photo by Preston Keres, USDA

to a simple prompt, such as how the information presented connects with their situation.

- Use the platform’s chat feature and/or polls to allow participants to share how they might use what they are learning.
- Include a farmer who is somewhat representative of the group as a co-presenter who provides a short presentation of how the content “plays out” in their farm—both successes and challenges.
- Show a video of a farm tour or practice for participants to react to and discuss.

In online learning environments, engaging positive emotions requires that learners feel safe. When people feel threatened, the feeling can often shut down their abil-

ity to receive and process information, whereas the emotions of joy and pleasant surprise prime the brain to receive and process new information (See “Engage Positive Emotions” in Bell and McAllister 2021). For these same reasons, it may be appropriate to consider getting even more specific with your target audience by developing affinity groups for women who share other intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, language and/or non-binary gender expression. Zaretta L. Hammond’s book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* explores these issues in regard to K–12 students, but much of the neurological patterns it describes can support the design of effective learning programs for adults as well.

When it comes to online learning for women, some participants may be very familiar and comfortable with online environments. Others may experience anxiety over their technical proficiency or having to speak in front of a large group of people they don’t know and can’t read well because of the reduction or skewing of non-verbal cues in a virtual environment. Also keep in mind that farm women are often

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**As adult learners, farmers enter learning with a wide range of experiences, knowledge and skills. Their brains are full of long-term memories that serve as scaffolding for new learning. ... When you are aware of the connections farmers make between new content and their lives you can make the content more relatable and target the curriculum to address gaps in experience and knowledge. —Bell and McAllister 2021**



juggling a range of farm, family and off-farm work responsibilities, and that there may be things happening in the home or on the farm that could be distracting them from full participation.

It's still critical to provide opportunities for practice and application of core concepts, particularly for your online events. For instance, learning opportunities that allow women to work together to experiment and solve real-life problems are effective approaches (see "Provide Opportunities for Practice and Application" in Bell and McAllister 2021), because they:

- Make learning relevant
- Allow learners to transform information into knowledge and skills
- Foster increasing complexity in knowledge and skills
- Help learners transfer knowledge and skills to new contexts

It's also important to give women learners opportunities to do research and synthesize information from a variety of resources before making decisions.

As you plan your event, it's critical to think about how to build in opportunities for learners to have a choice (see "Give Learners Choice" in Bell and McAllister 2021) about aspects of their training, from content development to learning activities and identifying hoped-for outcomes. This might mean changes to the content that you cover, the pace of delivery and/or revisiting your expectations for what your participants will know, believe and do because of participating. Gathering input from your participants ahead of time can help guide implementation during the event itself.

## Pre-Event: Promotion and Outreach

As with in-person events, established partnerships with key stakeholders that have pre-existing communications platforms can support the success of outreach and promotion efforts. Set up a spreadsheet or online database to collaboratively track the contacts that you and your team have who can help promote the event. Utilize this centralized place to track who reached out to whom and what the responses were. Consider asking interns, students and other external partners to help you spread the

word on social media, as well as through email newsletters of partner organizations. Recruit participants by promoting registration for at least four weeks in advance of the event.

## Registration and Reminders

To ensure security in the online setting, it is best to require participants to register ahead of time and to manually approve all registrants before the event. This can reduce the risk of people with malicious intentions from joining the event and causing a disruption (e.g., "Zoombombing"). With this added layer of security, participants will receive a unique link to join the meeting. You can also have them enter a password to join for additional security.

The trade-off to this added security is that registrants may receive the confirmation email from Zoom in their junk box, so it is good to have a staff member follow up individually with participants via email and to call them a day ahead to remind them of the event, confirm they received the join information and clarify the nature of the event. Many people are used to being able to passively engage in online events, such as webinars and meetings, so it is helpful to clarify how your event may be different if you hope to generate conversation, ask for their active participation, or have them on video and audio. Given that many women are often multitasking, it is helpful to provide a heads-up that they are expected/invited to participate actively and to be focused in front of their computer and webcam for the duration of the event, if that is your aim (see "Provide Opportunities for Practice and Application" in Bell and McAllister 2021).

Depending on your target audience, you may need to provide additional support to help women access the online platforms you're using. One week prior to gathering,

you might send instructions on how to join the platform along with their registration confirmation. Include tutorials for folks who need support getting the platform set up on their devices. Potentially host a pre-event call with people new to the platform to help them work out technical challenges.

## Practice Session

As opposed to in-person events, where an organizer can adjust on the fly, the online event requires a good deal more advanced preparation. Facilitators should consider hosting a practice session for co-facilitators, presenters and discussion leaders prior to the event. During this time, the facilitator can establish guidelines for what to do should the facilitator lose connectivity during the event, who will be designated as a co-host and the roles/responsibilities for leaders involved in the call. A practice session also allows technical experts to test their demonstrations, equipment, sound and space, as well as the features of the virtual platform to be used for the session.

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**One KEY thing learned (the hard way) in an unrelated virtual event earlier this year and emphasized in [my online Learning Circle] training is to PRACTICE.**

—Cayla Bendel, *Pheasants Forever*

.....”.....

## Pre-Work

To enhance relationship building and maximize interaction during the event, sending key information or asking participants to begin their learning ahead of the first gathering can help them get acquainted with the format, each other and what to expect during the event (see "Engage

### VIDEO TUTORIALS ON GETTING STARTED WITH ZOOM

These are examples of YouTube videos you can share with farmers that explain how to download Zoom on a smartphone and join a meeting, provided by the CaliWaterAg YouTube channel.

In English: <https://youtu.be/RK5krWoOoLU>

In Spanish: <https://youtu.be/QzuKKtAQQIk>

Positive Emotions” in Bell and McAllister 2021). If your event has a theme or plans to share in-depth information on a particular topic, you may want to send some questions that will help you to understand participants’ baseline knowledge of the topic and what they hope to get out of the event. You may want to encourage some homework ahead of time, such as viewing informational tutorials about the topics covered in the event, to get them excited and engaged prior to the event. Or you may wish to learn more about their relationship to agriculture, the type of operation they run or their land tenure situation. These can be captured in the registration questions and elaborated on via some pre-work questions (see “Identify Mental Models” in Bell and McAllister 2021).

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**Presenting virtually is a skill set, and it isn’t necessarily something that is immediately transferable from other settings, i.e., someone who may do fine presenting in a large room via a PowerPoint on a screen can’t necessarily just take that same format and run with it online. PowerPoint slides should be much simpler/less content as attendees are viewing on their computer or even on phones.”**

—Lisa Kivirist, *In Her Boots*

Along with pre-work, you may consider asking participants to send photos of themselves or their agricultural land/operation. Using a poll in Zoom to get their permission, you can potentially then use these photos of your participants and their land in future marketing. Since in-person events usually yield photos that can be used, this request of participants can be one way to substitute for day-of-event photos.

One or two days prior to gathering, send participants’ answers to the pre-event questions to all participants via email or in an online group (such as a Facebook group). Make sure it’s clear that you intend to share the results of their answers so that nobody is unpleasantly surprised, and generally keep individual answers anonymous.

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**We learned it is difficult (and frankly unnecessary) to try to do everything in a virtual event. That was a frustrating realization as we can and historically have covered so much ground at in-person field days, including prioritizing and fostering networking and social connections.**

—Lisa Kivirist, *In Her Boots*

## Event: Managing People in the Virtual Space

It’s important to create a safe space for vulnerability and for difficult conversations in online learning (see “Engage Positive Emotions” in Bell and McAllister 2021). Women-only spaces can often elicit deep sharing by participants, and it’s important to respect that space. We recommend not recording online sessions when there is deep personal information being shared. A good strategy is to record technical service information or more traditional teaching moments in an online webinar and to turn off the recording when folks share personal information and reflection. It’s really important to be transparent about when you’re recording and when you aren’t, and to give folks the option to turn on and off their camera if they don’t want to be recorded.

### Tips for Facilitators

Remember that when you’re facilitating a group process online or in person, you have a special role in guiding the group through the agenda. Consider choosing a co-facilitator to help you in doing the work of managing the group process, as it can be a lot for one person to handle. In fact, for virtual sessions, we recommend having three co-facilitators who can help with the agenda and the technical details. Sharing discrete roles between facilitators is critical, including having someone on board who can deal with technical difficulties or other challenges individuals might have that would otherwise derail the group experience (see the discussion on using technology to optimize virtual sessions in “Toolkit Resources”). A facilitator’s role is about working in

service of the group process so that folks can meet each other, learn, grow, share and reflect.

Here are some ways you can welcome and engage participants, and set the stage for a productive and supportive online cohort. Not every suggestion will apply to every situation, and you may have other ideas about ways to create a safe learning environment.

- Depending on the audience, length of the session and the season, schedule one or more short (2–5 minute) breaks during which participants can step away from the screen, stretch, use the bathroom, grab a drink/snack, etc.
- Address the limitations and frustrations of technology from the start of the session. Reassure women that at some point everyone will have a screen freeze or will talk while on mute. If facilitators acknowledge that issues can arise due to technological difficulties and that they have a plan to work through them, participants will be much less anxious about the technology and better situated to focus on the content.
- Allocate time for introductions and facilitate the session to make connections between participants’ interests and concerns.
- Provide time in introductions for individuals to share their story in relation to a particular session’s content. Allow them to identify things that might be potential distractions for them in that specific time and place. Acknowledge that these concerns are real and important.
- Use breakout/small-group sessions to give women an opportunity to establish connections with each other and to get experience using the platform and technology with a smaller “audience.”
- Model empathy, respect and clear communication. Facilitators may need to work on making their non-verbal cues more visible with bigger actions and reactions.
- Co-create ground rules that set common expectations for how the group will function. Revisit at intervals to fine-tune to meet the group’s needs (see the sample ground rules provided in “Toolkit Resources”).
- Create space through facilitation and ground rules that acknowledges power



## SETTING THE TONE WITH INTRODUCTIONS

An excellent practice is for the facilitator to set the tone by modeling the introduction first or by asking an experienced co-facilitator to do so. Set your participants up for success by sending in advance a few topics they can use to guide their introduction.

Repeating the guiding questions prior to starting the introductions as well as entering them in a chat box allows participants to both hear and read what's being asked of them.

One facilitator should then give their own introduction keeping to the format and time limit they've asked of their participants and concluding with a final repeat of the questions.

Finally, alerting the woman who will be up next, as well as one person after them, alleviates some anxiety by giving participants time to prepare as their turn approaches. Going alphabetically by first name is an easy order to follow.

- “My husband is the farmer. I just manage our staff and keep track of financial records.”
- “My farm is an integral part of the community in this area.”
- “I know I will have a difficult time getting a loan.”
- “I never really thought of myself as a farmer before now.”
- “I feel like there is some kind of secret society I don't belong to with an alphabet soup of acronyms.”

Mental models like these can affect how women will engage with particular topics. There are a variety of ways to begin uncovering participants' mental models so that participants are acknowledged and their needs are addressed through the program. Facilitators can include questions about expectations, needs and what participants are currently doing. These can be included in registration materials, as a pre-workshop assignment or survey, or embedded in the introductory portion of a session. Sharing that information back with the group and asking participants to respond and discuss the information can be a powerful way to get participants to begin identifying and questioning their own mental models.

It's also important to uncover the mental models the facilitator and technical experts hold—and those that are embedded in the curriculum—regarding content, learning

dynamics and works to reduce them.

- Set out clear expectations for the session (e.g., the agenda, start and end times), and keep the session on track.
- With cohorts that will meet multiple times, allocate some time at the beginning of each session for check-ins. Consider using an icebreaker question that gets everybody contributing, for example: “My favorite thing to do on a snowy winter day is ...”
- Provide an associated platform, possibly through social media or a blog, where participants can share bios, photos of themselves and their farm, and contact information (with participants' consent).
- Consider providing childcare/elder care stipends for in-home care, or possibly “replacement labor” stipends. Knowing that these things are “under control” can help give space to focus on the online session.

## Know Your Audience

The women who attend online education will arrive with mental models—knowledge, assumptions, beliefs and values—about farming, their land, their role on the farm and themselves as learners. These mental models have been formed by their experiences and will affect how they engage with the topics you're focusing on. Bell and McAllister (2021) observe that mental models are often tacit—individuals aren't

fully aware of them—and that unless they are known and addressed, new information is unlikely to result in behavior change.

The following are statements gleaned from participants in the AFT Women for the Land program ([www.farmland.org/women](http://www.farmland.org/women)) that provide insights into their experiences, assumptions, beliefs and values:

- “Taking care of the animals comes naturally to me, but I don't have a knack for the business plan.”



*Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust's Farmer Relief Fund*



Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust's Farmer Relief Fund

and learners. What experiences, beliefs, values and assumptions about gender and/or online learning are your participants, presenters and facilitators bringing to the session? How do they support or inhibit your educational goals? Understanding those things can help shape both content and format for a more successful program. See "Identify Mental Models" in Bell and McAllister (2021) for more on this topic.

## Post-Event: Evaluations

As part of the post-event work, we recommend spending time debriefing as a team to think about what worked well and what could be improved. For many, increasing the work in the virtual space means learning through practice. This will require iterative learning and an approach that allows for tweaks and changes between events, particularly if planning a series of coordinated events.

As with all group educational events, it's important to think about objectives and the intended outcomes associated with the event or convening. What information are people to walk away with? Is the event designed to help change knowledge, attitudes, intentions or behaviors around specific practices? Establishing clear learning goals and indicators at the start of your

planning process sets the stage for implementing practical and meaningful evaluation activities to document outcomes and identify ways to improve your programs and process. In many cases, these pieces have been developed for in-person events

.....“  
**For me, the loss of evaluation data discerned by watching the participants during the day is very problematic in understanding how effective the training is. Relying only on an online survey means an additional loss of data if participants don't reply.** —Jean Eells, E Resources Group, LLC  
 .....

and thus can be modified and adapted for the virtual environment. If you're just getting started developing an evaluation framework or are thinking about updating it, the Gaining Results through Evaluation Work project at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (University of California, Santa Cruz) has compiled an extensive online library of resources relevant to evaluation of farm and agricultural programs. It includes the guide *Identifying Outcomes for Program Evaluation*, which provides example outcomes, indicators and

data collections.

We recommend you gather some evaluation information before the close of your meeting. You can do this through a virtual poll (see Zoom's polling feature, for example) or simply by asking folks to reflect and share one thing they learned to wrap up the meeting. Use a chat box feature if time doesn't allow for a live discussion.

You'll most likely want a follow-up evaluation, either via an online survey tool or a paper copy that you mail to participants. However, mail-in evaluations are costly from a time and resource perspective; an online survey of some kind is recommended with a few email reminders to boost response rates. You can achieve anonymity in an online evaluation tool by not requiring people to leave their name/contact information, and for most online tools you can click a box so that you aren't collecting IP addresses. It's important to be transparent with respondents if the evaluation tool is designed to be anonymous rather than just confidential. It always helps to explain how the information is used and why it's valuable to you as you plan future events.

Another option is to develop a questionnaire and have staff call participants to conduct a phone interview. With this route, be aware that anonymity is hard to achieve

unless an outside evaluator conducts the interviews.

As with all things associated with evaluation, have a plan in place before your event and be thoughtful about ensuring collection of information to aid in tracking intended outcomes. Be prepared to receive a smaller response rate with virtual evaluation tools due to their optional nature; consider doing follow-up interviews if you need a higher response rate than what online tools are giving you or if you're seeking more qualitative input.



## Post-Event: Participant Follow Up

The final piece is to follow up with participants. A great deal of work went into developing their relationships in the group, but participants in online programming may find it challenging to sustain these connections without your facilitation. Due to the shortened nature of online events and the lack of built-in networking times such as coffee breaks and lunch, a facilitator has to be creative in keeping their participants connected.

You can encourage continued networking in a number of ways, depending on what participants request. For example, you can establish private groups on social media for members or share a participant email list with permission.

In-person learning circles often provide a resource table for participants to access informational materials. In the absence of this, one of the facilitators should be aware of participants looking for more information on a topic during discussion and should follow up with those resources. The same is true for access to the technical experts featured during the session. Allow time after the official session for one-on-one questions with the expert, or offer a method of contact, if possible. Most tech-

### INFORMAL ENGAGEMENT IDEAS

Check out the virtual “office hours” that Soul Fire Farm hosts with their Ask a Sista Farmer programming on Instagram Live ([www.instagram.com/soul-firefarm/](http://www.instagram.com/soul-firefarm/)) during which, every first Friday of the month, “experienced Black womxn farmers” answer questions about all manner of farming and food preservation. Older recordings are also available on their Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/soulfirefarm/events](http://www.facebook.com/soulfirefarm/events)).

nical experts are happy to share their email and provide any supplemental support to those in attendance.

Facilitators should send a follow-up email to participants (including registrants who did not attend) and provide resources from the meeting. These can include, but are not limited to:

- A recording of the meeting (if you’ve been transparent with participants ahead of time that this would be shared)
- A copy of slides/handouts and technical information covered in the discussion
- A contact list of all participants to support their continued networking
- Links to resources mentioned during the session
- A contact list of relevant technical service providers and clear information

about where to go next for more information, support, resources, etc., including a breakdown of common agency and program acronyms they may encounter when seeking technical support

Sample follow-up email language and examples of resource lists used by AFT are provided in the “Toolkit Resources” section of this guide.

### Virtual Networks on Social Media

Facebook groups, Google Groups, Mighty Networks or other online platforms can help to support women in staying connected after events. GreenMaps and Google Maps are free tools that allow people to create maps of locations and add details about the locations. These can be good tools for supporting women to self-organize and create a network organically over time.

If these are too onerous to create, continued engagement via your organization’s own social media accounts (Twitter, Instagram and Facebook) can keep the conversation going with women in agriculture in your communities. International Women’s Day, Women’s Equality Day and other national celebrations are good opportunities for “social media takeover” days when your team can focus on a communications campaign to engage and solicit input from women in agriculture. Efforts like this are good ways to help amplify women-led farms and ranches online by leveraging the platforms of your organization or institution to highlight the work and perspectives of women you serve. You could also consider doing virtual “office hours” using a social media platform such as Instagram or Twitter, or simply have Zoom “office hours” for people to log in and engage.



Photo by Preston Keres, USDA

# Toolkit Resources

## Example Learning Circle Pre-Work Email

Here's a sample email you might send Learning Circle members to share how they should prepare for an upcoming event they've registered for.

**Subject line:** Welcome to our Virtual Women for the Land Learning Circle

**Attachments:**

- Participant agenda

Thank you for registering for our Women for the Land Learning Circle! The purpose of this event is to connect you with fellow women farmers and agricultural service providers in your area. Our conversations will center on the climate-change-related stressors you may be observing on the land and what you can do about them, both on your farm and in your community.

We hope you will join for both days of this event (X and X) as the learning and networking opportunities will build on each other from week to week.

**How to join the meeting in Zoom:**

(COPY AND PASTE THEIR CONFIRMATION LINK from Zoom for each individual)

If you need assistance setting up Zoom, audio, or video on your device, please explore the Zoom Help Center (<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us>) or the CaliWaterAg YouTube channel (which includes technology tutorial playlists in English and Spanish), or reach out to me!

**Expectations during the Learning Circle:**

Attached is an agenda that outlines what to expect throughout the event. If you have access to a printer, you may want to print this out to have in front of you during the meeting, but that is optional.

Please plan to be seated at your computer during the Learning Circle.

Below is a set of ground rules for the ways we invite you to be in the virtual space with other participants (also available at [www.ucar.edu/who-we-are/diversity-inclusion/community-resources/ground-rules-tools](http://www.ucar.edu/who-we-are/diversity-inclusion/community-resources/ground-rules-tools)).

**Introducing ourselves:**

Please reply to this email with a photo of yourself in your role in agriculture (or just a photo of yourself) along with the answers to the questions below by midnight X/XX. I will share these with the group before the event so we can all get to know each other a bit.

1. Who are you? (e.g., What is your name? Where are you from?)
2. What is your relationship to land? (e.g., What is your role in agriculture? How long have you been in that role? What drives you?)
3. What motivated you to join this Learning Circle?

Looking forward to getting to know you!

## Facilitation Tips: Setting Ground Rules

Adopting a set of ground rules can help all participants feel comfortable in a Learning Circle or discussion group. One approach is to start with a blank whiteboard and shared screen and use a brainstorm process to elicit suggested guidelines from the group.

Another option, which can save some time, is to start with a set of possible ground rules and invite the group to say how they might like to modify or add to the list.

The table on the next page offers some overarching “norms” that are important to establish for a successful Learning Circle/group, as well as some options for the wording of a ground rule or guideline.

**Please note:** This table offers multiple ways that a group can express the norms that it wants to follow. Pick and choose from those that you think make the most sense for your group. Depending on the group, you may need to address additional considerations and/or find a different way to word a particular guideline for your group. This list is not exhaustive: Other ideas may emerge that are relevant to establishing and maintaining a safe, non-judgmental learning environment for your group.

If you opt to develop the ground rules from scratch, it can help to begin by having the facilitator suggest a guideline. Then solicit



Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust's Farmer Relief Fund



NORM	SAMPLE GUIDELINE LANGUAGE
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» We listen respectfully to each other.</li> <li>» We respect each view, opinion and experience offered by any participant.</li> <li>» We assume a positive intent.</li> </ul>
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» We share responsibility to make this circle/group work.</li> <li>» We show up on time and come prepared to participate. This includes advance reading or viewing and completing any individual work assigned from the previous session.</li> <li>» We speak for ourselves, not as a representative of a group.</li> </ul>
Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» What's said in "the circle" stays in "the circle." OR:</li> <li>» What's said here stays here. What's learned here leaves here.</li> </ul>
Reciprocity and equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» We give everybody the opportunity to speak without interruption, <b>except the facilitator</b>, who may interrupt to keep the conversation on track.</li> <li>» We allow time for silence and for more reserved voices.</li> <li>» Each person has an opportunity to contribute an idea/speak to a topic before anyone can contribute a second idea.</li> <li>» We may choose to pass if we are not ready to speak on a topic.</li> <li>» When we are confused, we use clarifying questions to obtain better understanding.</li> </ul>
Technology and distractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» We can choose to use the chat feature to share resources and add to the discussion as a whole.</li> <li>» We refrain from using the chat feature for crosstalk and side discussions.</li> <li>» We keep our attention in the circle by closing other computer programs, silencing our phone, and turning off apps and notifications.</li> <li>» We understand that at some point any of us may experience a farm/personal situation that could interrupt our participation.</li> </ul>

ideas from the group, adding five or six more guidelines to the list. If suggestions emerge that don't appear conducive to the learning environment, gently challenge those ideas using clarifying questions.

You can post the guidelines in a common space (such as a Google Drive folder) that everyone can access. You may want to set aside a couple of minutes at the beginning of every session to remind the group about the ground rules. Depending on how well the group is functioning and how many sessions your Learning Circle will have, you may want to check in midway through the series to see if the group wants to modify the ground rules.

Other examples of ground rules and agreements include:

- Soul Fire Farm's Guidelines for Safer Space
- University of California's Ground Rules and Tools: Facilitating Production Discussions

Additional facilitation resources include:

- Delia Clark, Confluence
- Margaret Reil's guide to the Learning Circle model
- Facilitation Basics, by Ellen Rowe and Mary Peabody, UVM Extension
- Leading Groups Online, a guide
- American Farmland Trust's Tips for Hosting a Learning Circle

## Using Technology to Optimize Virtual Sessions

The following tips are helpful for both facilitators and participants:

- Use a high-quality microphone if you have one.
- Have three to four staff play different roles: main facilitator, note-taker, chat watcher, troubleshooter, etc.
- Send instructions to participants ahead of time, or maybe host a pre-event runthrough.

### VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES FROM OTHERS

Soul Fire Farm's BIPOC-Led How to Videos, Gardening Projects and Online Learning Resources (<https://bit.ly/3CwLjey>)

Practical Farmers of Iowa's Virtual Field Days: How-To and Best Practices (<https://bit.ly/3ElajkS>)

The Wallace Center started a virtual COVID-19 response group and listserv, taking a new approach to virtual engagement ([www.surveymonkey.com/r/JF73D5W](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/JF73D5W))

Some tips to provide participants before Zoom meetings include:

- Join the meeting at least five minutes before the start time to make sure you can join successfully.
- If possible, it's best to use a device that allows you to join through both video and audio (e.g., a computer with a webcam or a smartphone).
- If you don't have a computer with a webcam or a smartphone, you can also call in, but your ability to participate will be limited.
- If you have trouble with the video cutting out on your computer, you can call in by regular phone, then mute your audio and keep your video on in Zoom. That way you can watch and be seen, but you'll still be caught up to the conversation even when your video cuts out.
- It's best to use earphones and mute your microphone when you aren't speaking. This keeps all of us from hearing noises in your home, and it prevents echoing and audio feedback.
- There is a "raise your hand" function you can use to alert the speaker that you have something to say. The chat function also allows you to write down your questions or give input throughout the meeting. Occasionally the facilitator may ask you to write something into the chat.
- If you're using breakout rooms, assign a moderator for each room to help participants get the most out of the experience.
- Manage your expectations for how much you'll accomplish, noting that it will likely be less than you would in person.
- Use a Zoom poll to ask people to consent to use their photo if they sent one.

## Capturing Farm Tours Virtually

In-person farm tours are a great way to provide nuanced information about growing practices and their impacts in a farmer friendly manner. Virtual platforms can be utilized to conduct pre-recorded footage of a farm tour with the farmer joining live to provide commentary over the footage or by using a livestream service to provide participants a direct glimpse into the inner workings of a farm, its practices and the impacts those practices have had on the land.

### Benefits

- Farm tours are especially helpful when sharing information about specific on-farm practices, as they allow growers an opportunity to ask each other questions and to showcase specific examples of how they adapted the practice for their context crop, scale and geography.
- Research shows that delivering content via a trusted messenger supports behavior change, and farmers tend to trust each other a great deal, so having a fellow farmer share their practices with peers is a powerful tool for supporting innovative practice adoption.
- In-person farm tours sometimes require setting up additional bathrooms or safety procedures on site, adding amplification, arranging transportation and other logistics. Depending on the

technological access of the farm and organizers, virtual farm tours can simplify the logistics of planning.

- Whether conducted via livestream or via pre-recorded footage, recorded farm tours can live on organizations' websites or YouTube channels, allowing more people to benefit from the content than would have been able to attend in person.
- Pre-recorded videos can be translated into multiple languages via closed captioning translation services.

### Challenges

- Weather and wind can pose challenges for audio quality. Special audio and video recording equipment, such as microphones with wind covers, can support organizers with quality control.
- Using amateur equipment such as a smartphone to record audio and video can result in high quality footage but should be approached with some best practices in mind, such as reducing movement of the camera during recording, ensuring that the smartphone is in the landscape versus portrait orientation while recording, and supporting the farmer to have some talking points for the tour.
- Limited rural broadband access can make livestream tours challenging in some places.

### Virtual Demonstration of On-Farm Practices

Hands-on demonstrations are an excellent tool to get more interaction from the audience, explain concepts and practices with a visual component, and, if done correctly, further emphasize the impact of an idea. Pivoting to online discussions requires a slight adjustment in the delivery of demonstrations but ultimately is very similar to conducting them in person.

### Tips for Conducting Online Demonstrations

- Practice the chosen demonstration in advance and online.
- Ensure the video quality, sound, visual aids and background are all conducive to communicating the intended message. White, tri-fold poster boards are excellent backgrounds.
- Consider a macro lens attachment for your camera.
- Think through how the demo is normally done in person and what adaptations need to be made for online. Hold small items close to the camera to take the place of passing around a circle.
- Consider how to describe different qualities of a sample, such as touch and smell, to paint a picture for your audience.
- Provide participants with a list of supplies to do an at home demo.
- Keep in mind your video and sound limitations, and adjust accordingly. Make sure the entire demo is visible and the audience can still hear the speaker.
- Demos do not need to be conducted live. They can be pre-recorded and played back during the online session. A best practice is to narrate live while the recording is playing due to often problematic audio playback.
- A series of photos can be used to show close up views of samples prior to a video.



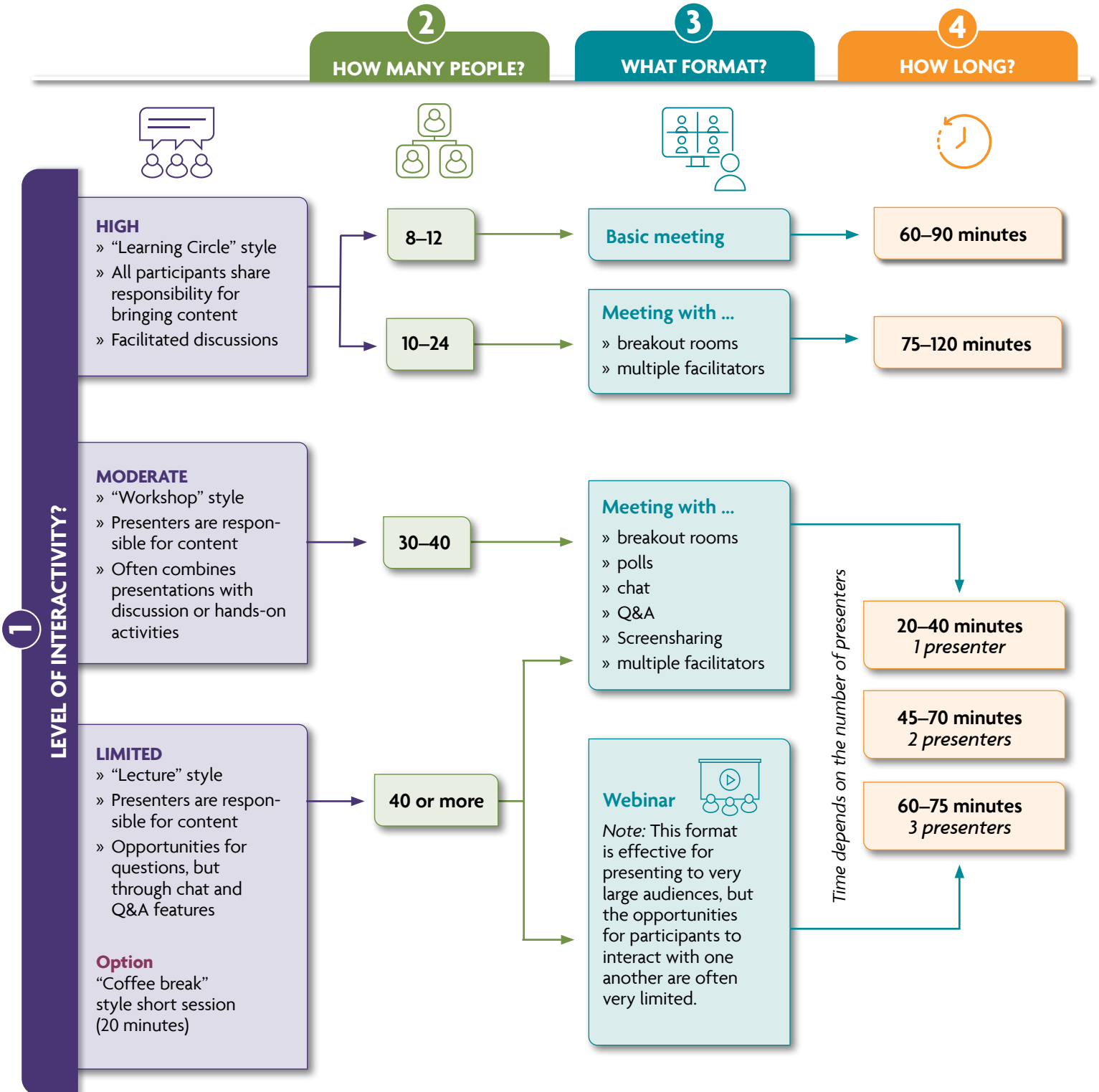
## VIRTUAL FARM TOUR EXAMPLES

Farm tours are one of the most valuable aspects of in-person Learning Circles, field days and gatherings for women farmers and ranchers. There's no more trusted messenger than one's peers. That's why it's so important to try to bring the farm to the people when you can't bring the people to the farm. This section offers a few formats for virtual farm tours that our team and partners recommend, including their pros and cons, and examples of each format put to use.

VIRTUAL FARM TOUR EXAMPLE	PROS	CONS
<p><b>An organization visits a farm and uses a smartphone to film the farmer</b>, interviewing them about a specific topic while filming footage of their land. The team at American Farmland Trust employed this strategy in 2020 using an iPhone to record and iMovie to edit short stories from women farmers to include in Women for the Land Virtual Learning Circles.</p> <p>View these examples on YouTube at <a href="https://bit.ly/3hZqWYA">https://bit.ly/3hZqWYA</a>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Does not require advanced video or audio equipment, if a high-quality smartphone is already available from someone on the team</li> <li>» Allows the farmer to answer a set of questions to keep them on topic for the event and to draw out specific information the organizers hope to highlight for the participants</li> <li>» Allows the farmer to share their experience on the farm and to join the event live to answer participants' questions after viewing the video</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Access to video editing software is necessary to make the interview more polished and to stitch together still images, music and logos into the finished product</li> </ul>
<p><b>A farmer uses a smartphone to record their own tour of their farm</b>, including commentary that they can play during the Zoom call.</p> <p>For example: <a href="http://www.chatsworthfarm.ca/in-person-virtual-farm-tours.html">www.chatsworthfarm.ca/in-person-virtual-farm-tours.html</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Cheap to produce; any farmer with a smartphone can record this</li> <li>» Provides an intimate glimpse into the farmer's experience and perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Can be choppy, distracting and difficult to watch if not filmed carefully and in the right phone orientation</li> <li>» Doesn't allow you to see the farmer recording the video</li> <li>» Lots of background noise will be picked up in audio</li> <li>» May require editing to cut out transitions between locations</li> </ul>
<p><b>A farmer uses a drone to silently record footage of their farm</b> and provides commentary live during a Zoom call.</p> <p>For example: <a href="https://youtu.be/AvqtInMjieU">https://youtu.be/AvqtInMjieU</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Potentially improved video quality</li> <li>» Bird's eye and 360-degree views are possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Need to obtain a drone, get farmer consent and/or support the farmer in using the drone to film, if they don't already have experience</li> <li>» May not show close-up views of soil, root structures or other ground-level features</li> </ul>
<p><b>An organization hosts a facilitated livestream farm tour</b>, filmed by someone other than the farmer giving the tour, and the facilitator curates questions from the audience to have the farmer answer live.</p> <p>For example: <a href="https://fb.watch/bEwqxpTQjP/">https://fb.watch/bEwqxpTQjP/</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Allows a relationship to be built between farmers and the audience via the facilitator taking questions from the viewers in the chat box</li> <li>» Video quality may be improved by having a third party film the farmer giving the tour</li> <li>» Curated questions from the facilitators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» A greater requirement in terms of equipment, staff capacity and farmer preparation</li> </ul>

## WHAT KIND OF VIRTUAL SESSION?

This chart will guide you toward recommended virtual formats (meeting structure and length) based on the level of interactivity you are aiming for and how many participants you are expecting. Begin by determining your desired level of interactivity: high, moderate or limited.







Attendees at a pre-COVID Women in Conservation Leadership conference. *Photo by David Harp.*

## Case Studies from Partner Organizations

### Case studies were developed in the summer of 2020.

As part of our effort to understand how organizations in the agriculture and natural resources field pivoted to the online format, we sought input and stories from partners in the field, sharing successes and challenges in doing their work in the virtual space.

We asked respondents to reflect on a series of questions regarding how their events changed in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, what they learned and what challenges they faced, including what surprised them about pivoting to virtual spaces. We also asked them to reflect on what they plan to take with them for future events, both virtual and in person, as well as a general reflection on their experiences.

Respondents included (in the order they were received):

- Elizabeth Lillard, Women in Conservation Leadership, National Wildlife Federation
- Maggie Norton, Practical Farmers of Iowa
- Caitlin Joseph and Ashley Brucker (also authors of this guide), Women for the Land Initiative at American Farmland Trust
- Cayla Bendel and Kim Cole, Pheasants Forever
- Jean Eells, E Resources Group, LLC
- Lisa Kivirist, formerly with In Her Boots, a program of the Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service
- Wren Almitra, Women Food and Agriculture Network and Women, Land and Legacy

## Elizabeth Lillard, Women in Conservation Leadership, National Wildlife Federation

### How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

The Women in Conservation Leadership Program centers on a large biannual conference that was scheduled for March 2020. After the conference, the plan for the year was to develop and expand year-long programming opportunities and events. Ten days before the 2020 Summit we had to postpone due to escalating concerns about COVID-19. We postponed the Summit to mid-October, thinking that would be enough time for the pandemic to resolve. Pushing the conference back about six months has forced us to also delay our expanded programming development. Our team's capacity for strategic planning and outreach is limited by ensuring the fall conference proceeds without any issues. We have recently decided to shift the conference to a virtual platform, as COVID-19 continues to be a serious issue.

### What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

We are still in the process of shifting, and I'll be able to share more once the conference is over. Some of the benefits I have noticed so far:

- It is much easier to get speakers/panelists to join because no travel or travel time is involved. Folks can have two speaking engagements in the same day, whereas being in person would really limit their schedule.
- A virtual meeting is more accessible to a lot of folks because it only requires the registration fee (no travel, lodging or extra days out of the office are required).
- The virtual format makes it much easier to handle transition times and to get folks where they need to go. This is a big issue when dealing with a conference with 500+ attendees.

I'm most concerned about how to ensure the networking piece is not lost. That is one of the biggest downsides to the virtual platform.

### What lessons have you taken away that will inform both virtual and in-person events in the future?

Communication and easily accessible information are key to a successful event. It doesn't matter if you have the most amazing speakers or sessions, if people can't figure out when they are speaking or how to access them it will be a wasted effort. This is



Elizabeth Lillard, National Wildlife Federation

especially true for a virtual conference.

Another part of this is making sure your speakers have all the tools they need to be successful. This includes sharing best practices, technology run-throughs, well-prepared moderators, etc.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

Practice and over explain. As the event organizer you have more information and context than anyone else you work with. In a virtual setting this is especially true because people can't just ask you a question discreetly behind the registration table.

Contact: Elizabeth Lillard, [LillardE@nwf.org](mailto:LillardE@nwf.org), (734) 887-7134



## Maggie Norton, Practical Farmers of Iowa



Maggie Norton, Practical Farmers of Iowa

### How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

Practical Farmers of Iowa's (PFI) bread and butter are the annual conference and our field day season. These two event types allow members and non-members to learn from one another, but they also act as networking and social opportunities. The combination of knowledge exchange and socializing helps build the PFI community. This spring, we had to make dramatic changes to our field day season in order to keep event attendees safe during the ongoing pandemic. The only path forward was to shift to a completely virtual format. Since we have nearly 10 years of experience hosting an online winter "farminar" series, we decided to build from that foundation. For the past couple years, we have been using Zoom to facilitate that series, so we decided to continue using Zoom for the virtual field days. Then, depending on the type of interaction the staff and speakers wanted with the audience (as well as reach), they decided whether the virtual field day would be contained and broadcasted within Zoom only or also streamed to Facebook. The initial thought was that we could facilitate more dialog within Zoom since conversation with a Facebook audience is limited to text in the comments section. Besides the virtual fields days we've also converted other events like the Next Generation Summit to a virtual format (Zoom meetings) and started new series like the Strategies for

Strange Times weekly calls during the early months of the pandemic (ran for 12 consecutive weeks via Zoom meetings).

Outreach during this time has also included virtual field day trainings, troubleshooting and providing event assistance with other organizations, partners and members. I've given six different trainings to a total of 220 participants and shared the training resources with numerous other organizations and individuals. It's been a really rewarding experience as a new employee, and it has allowed me to build my network along the way.

### What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

Equipment matters. Literally gearing up for the virtual field day season, we purchased a handful of "equipment kits" to send to farmers to pre-record video and/or stream live. Providing a good Bluetooth earpiece made a world of a difference in audio quality for listeners at home. The technology is so easy to use too that there was hardly a learning curve for anyone who wasn't already familiar with it. Additional pieces of equipment we sent out—even lower tech—were two tripods. One was with flexible legs, which allows the user to attach their camera onto equipment or other structures. The second tripod would position the camera several feet off the ground. They didn't use the tripods! Some did, but so many others opted to have a camera person that just held the camera the entire time. Guess what, you aren't as stable as you think! With connections as poor as they are in rural areas, every movement is a frame adjustment and that results in a constantly blurred video for many viewers. Moving forward with our virtual events, we're going to continue fine-tuning the equipment kits and instructions, and setting clear expectations.

### What worked well?

Overall, all of it! Under the circumstances I think we nailed it. There are always technical difficulties onscreen and behind the scenes, but that's no biggie in the grand scheme of things. Everyone understands we've all been trying to do the best we can over the past several months.

"The only path forward was to shift to a completely virtual format. Since we have nearly 10 years of experience hosting an online winter 'farminar' series, we decided to build from that foundation."



A virtual field day held on Zoom. Photo courtesy Practical Farmers of Iowa

Everyone on staff and all our farmer speakers have stepped up and adapted, and we were able to provide flexibility within our formats to accommodate the vision of our staff and speakers. There is a core team of about seven people that contributes to various dimensions of the inner workings of our virtual field day season. We've become a well-oiled machine, and when something changes requiring action from the team, it's fun to see everyone's names pop up in comments responding to their specific niche. I think I find that aspect of teamwork even more energizing now that we are working apart from one another. Knowing that my coworkers are simultaneously working on the same thing is nice—we're together in a sense.

### What didn't work so well?

I'm a bit disappointed in the Zoom events. I think the webinar events are too restrictive, and the meeting formats can be messy if you're not careful. I was hoping the Zoom webinars would encourage more dialog and engagement between speakers and the audience, but I think there were a lot of mic-shy attendees out there. It would have been nice for attendees to see one another's names and to have the ability to chat directly with other participants, which is another limitation of the webinar format. Zoom meetings are more dynamic, but then you can't query a good attendee report, which is important on the backend for us. There are a lot of tradeoffs to consider when selecting the right format. I wish we had more time at the beginning of our virtual field day season to weigh out some other options.

### What surprised you?

Honestly, I'm not sure. This was all totally uncharted territory for me, so what do I use for a baseline? I kind of surprised myself, I guess. Never would I have guessed a year ago that I would know the ins and outs of creating live videos on Facebook and linking multiple platforms together to stream content. It was an excit-

ing puzzle to work out, but this is not a skillset I ever intended to have.

### What lessons have you taken away that will inform both virtual and in-person events in the future?

Virtual events will continue to be a well-used tool. Even when we get back to a point where we can hold in-person events, I think we will incorporate live streaming (strategically) so that attendees farther away can participate. I also believe we will continue to flex these newfound muscles: We won't necessarily constrain ourselves to Zoom and Facebook. There are lots of platforms out there, so why not dabble to see what really works best? We'll also become increasingly creative with how we share our content virtually. We have lots of out-of-the-box thinkers at PFI, and they have come up with a storm of clever ideas that I hope to see deployed in the future.

### Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

Prepare and practice. And practice some more. This isn't as intimidating as it seems, but you need to get your ducks in a row ahead of time so you can relax and have fun during your event. Determine what kind of experience you want to have with your audience, select a platform that facilitates that, build an agenda and practice. And remember, it's totally fair to lean on organizational partners or friends and family to make the event work. We're all looking for "wins" right now and it feels even better if you help facilitate one!

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**Contact: Maggie Norton, [maggie\\_n@practicalfarmers.org](mailto:maggie_n@practicalfarmers.org), (515) 232-5661**

## PROFILE



Photos submitted by participants in a virtual Learning Circle, including (from left): Mary Bianchi, Kelsey Karol, Linda Hernandez Larsen and Sami Weiss. *Photos courtesy American Farmland Trust*

## Caitlin Joseph and Ashley Brucker, Women for the Land Initiative, American Farmland Trust

### How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

COVID-19 had huge implications for our national Women for the Land (WFL) team. In 2020, we set a project in motion to nearly double the geographic reach of our programming while expanding the topics and audiences we've previously engaged with through our Learning Circles. This would have been ambitious enough without having to also reinvent the way we conduct the Learning Circles themselves. At first, our team planned to still host in-person events while building our skillset for a back-up online version. But as May 2020 approached, it became clear that we would definitely need to shift to hosting events online. We found that Zoom was the platform most conducive to setting up the non-hierarchical, relationship-based gatherings we needed to cultivate. Drawing on "examples our Natural Resources Conservation Service and Dairy Council partners shared with us, as well as on ex-

"This delayed our implementation by three months, during which time we conducted one-on-one phone calls with potential participants to identify their needs and to build partnerships that could help us reach audiences able to engage online."

amples from YouTube, we explored options for producing virtual farm tours and live or pre-recorded demonstrations to replace the hands-on components of our in-person Learning Circles.

For our California planning team, COVID-19 primarily impacted the timeline for implementing our Learning Circles and forced us to move to an online platform. We used a local stakeholder-driven process. It took our team a lot of needs assessment and relationship-building to get to a place where our partners felt committed to diving into implementation. This delayed our implementation by three months, during which time we conducted one-on-one phone calls with potential participants to identify their needs and to build partnerships that could help us reach audiences able to engage online. We also had to learn the ins and outs of the Zoom platform, ensure security via registration, build curriculum appropriate to the online setting and test out how to play videos within Zoom meetings to replace the hands-on components of in-person events.

From our Midwest team: In every single way imaginable. One moment I was planning months of Learning Circles covering all areas of three states, finding partners, advising them on locations, catering and farm visits. I distinctly remember the first circle to cancel completely. It took us two weeks to decide the April 3 Learning Circle on cover crops would be cancelled; it has never been rescheduled. None of the in-person Learning Circles have been rescheduled. Formerly I would recruit people to participate by direct one-on-one outreach, phone calls and emails. They would tag along with a neighbor or family member, sometimes for lunch and dessert more than anything. Now I'm using email lists and social media campaigns, there is no dessert, and most participants aren't even in the same timezone as me.





Caitlin Joseph, *American Farmland Trust Women for the Land*

### What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

Virtual events are A LOT of work and are constantly changing. I put in more time arranging a two-hour virtual Learning Circle than I do a full day in-person one. There is very little room for “winging it.” Everything must be planned, prepped and practiced to have any semblance of organization. I am continuously adjusting my agendas and content according to how well something worked or didn’t.

Co-facilitators and discussion leaders are also more important than they have ever been. Support in monitoring the group, chat features and Q&As is very helpful. Also, giving yourself and your participants a break from listening to one speaker/facilitator helps keep the discussion active and inclusive.

### What worked well?

There is clearly a lot of demand for this type of programming in California. We had over 50 people try to register for our first event, which was targeting a three-county cluster in the Central Coast region of California. Thirty four of those were people actually associated with agriculture in those counties, and 18 of them ended up joining the online Learning Circle. We got local resource providers in each of the three counties to join the event to share about the services they provide, and we leveraged the support of a USDA Climate Hubs researcher to facilitate a discussion on the climate-related stressors women are experiencing on their land and what they can do about it. We also shared information about where women can get involved in advocacy and leadership. Women reported gaining confidence in their knowledge of climate-change stressors affecting agriculture in their area, as well as increased knowledge about whom to turn to for support. Many reported their motivation to utilize USDA and Resource Conser-



Ashley Brucker, *American Farmland Trust Ohio*

vation and Development programs and technical assistance for support. Participants were able to share some of their struggles, including family dynamics, the challenges associated with gaining respect and credibility in a male-dominated field, and the need for more support for aspiring farmers and farmers of color. Having promoted the circle as being open to anyone who identifies as a woman and who stewards agricultural land, and utilizing the support of local partners for outreach, we were able to host a wide diversity of women, including women of many racial and ethnic backgrounds, production systems and land tenure circumstances.

Soil health demonstrations worked better than I could have ever imagined. Many participants stayed on the call beyond the allotted time to see the additional demos we had prepared.

### What didn’t work so well?

The diversity of the group and the large turnout were certainly an asset, but they were also a challenge and meant some tradeoffs in terms of the depth we could reach in our discussion about on-farm practices that women could implement. With so many different production systems and land tenure situations among the participants, we had to curate breakout groups according to those to allow them time to discuss with their closest peers. This “affinity group” model did work well once we set it up, but it was a challenge because we didn’t ask about what production system people had in the registration questions, so it had to be drawn out during the meeting or via individual emails to participants. Lots of work for the facilitator! But ultimately it allowed for some new relationships to be sparked and for the resource professionals to really get some “face time” with smaller groups of women in their areas.

Regarding PowerPoints—anything more than five slides and you’ve lost the group.

## What surprised you?

I was surprised by how hard it is to hold peoples' attention any time screen sharing is happening by a presenter. We really tried to minimize the use of PowerPoint, but even with just 3–5 slides being presented by one person, participants clammed up a bit, and it was difficult to revive discussion.

Also, the networking and conversations amongst participants and resource providers has been even more open than in person. We have had smaller groups, and they are from all areas of the country, so perhaps that extra bit of anonymity is encouraging. I have always heard that it doesn't matter how many people you have at an event as long as you have the right people. The women who have participated have definitely been the right women. They come from every type or background: farm owners, operators, absentee, organic, conventional, beginning, everything. However, they still wanted to help each other, encourage each other and listen to each other. In four years of Learning Circles the virtual sessions have been the most rewarding.

## What lessons have you taken away that will inform both virtual and in-person events in the future?

In the future, I think it will be key for us to work closely with partners and speakers to emphasize that the online meeting itself

“The networking and conversations amongst participants and resource providers has been even more open than in person. We have had smaller groups, and they are from all areas of the country, so perhaps that extra bit of anonymity is encouraging.”

should be focused on generating discussion, asking questions, listening to participants' needs and building relationships across women. Conveying information should be done via creative means such as pre-recorded video presentations, farm tours or demonstrations that participants can view on their own time and then discuss during the full group gathering. This is something we plan to try out in our upcoming circles.

We also learned some lessons the hard way regarding the amount of work it takes to coordinate Zoom meetings with registration. In order to keep each individual's unique

Zoom link safe (to prevent “Zoombombing”) and support our audiences (who are not all very tech savvy), we had to send out individual emails to each registrant with their join link and the

participant agenda so they knew what to expect. I think many people sign up for online events thinking that they are going to be webinar-style engagements that they can passively listen to while multitasking on other things. But our Learning Circles are meant to bring women into presence with one another and to really listen to each other's stories as the basis for learning critical skills and information that's typically not easily accessible for them.

Lastly, both virtual and in-person events have their place in outreach and education. The women who were very involved while the Learning Circles were in person are not interested in virtual Learning Circles. The women involved in the virtual weren't interested in in-person, should we offer those again.

## Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

There are many places in California where farmers and ranchers can go to for information and support. But we know from data and from speaking with agricultural resource providers that it remains rare for women, gender nonbinary, Black, Indigenous and people of color farmers to be utilizing these services to their full potential. Resource providers working to address these disparities find that conducting outreach with under-represented farmers is challenging. There is a lot of trust that needs to be built, and in many cases there are structural challenges and painful histories to contend with, particularly for women of color in agriculture. And yet, we know there are many resilient, passionate women and farmers of color forging a path in agriculture nonetheless. We will need all hands on deck to realize a resilient, food secure future, especially in California. To amplify what one of our participants, Helen McGrath, said in her introductory questions—“California agriculture is going to experience severe transitions in the coming years and decades, and we will need unprecedented collaboration, innovation and equity throughout the ag system to survive.” Though not a perfect replacement for in-person learning, these virtual gatherings are providing a lifeline for many women who are feeling a bit isolated right now. We've started to see that these gatherings can be an antidote to that isolation, a salve for the open wounds between struggling farmers and the agencies meant to support them, and a necessary infusion of interdisciplinary learning to drive the resilience our farmers will need. I welcome everyone reading this to think about how we can collectively improve our efforts towards this intention through the Women for the Land initiative and across our collaborative efforts.

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**Contact: Caitlin Joseph, Women for the Land program and policy manager, [cjoseph@farmland.org](mailto:cjoseph@farmland.org), (916) 282-3994**

**Ashley Brucker, Ag Conservation Innovations program manager, [abrucker@farmland.org](mailto:abrucker@farmland.org), (614) 696-6623**



## PROFILE



Photo by Cayla Bendel, Pheasants Forever

## Cayla Bendel and Kim Cole, Pheasants Forever

### How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

I would say the primary effect COVID had on my outreach events is a delay in planning efforts. In addition to that, there were inconsistent beliefs and opinions on how to navigate the situation and of course some reduced attendance at in-person events due to safety concerns. At the initial outbreak it was difficult to make decisions about scheduled events, to pursue new landowner hosts and to figure out how to continue to accomplish our mission in such uncertain times. Many possible hosts and partners were unable or unwilling to commit to working together this year. Furthermore, I worked with landowners who were persistent about in-person events and likewise those who felt more comfortable with a virtual event. Social distancing and additional sanitation measures (hand sanitizer, optional masks, COVID signage, food serving and packaging adjustments, portable restroom rental, etc.) were all implemented at in-person events, creating additional costs.

The biggest impact of COVID-19 was simply having to cancel events. We had plans for several Women Caring for the Land Learning Circles but had to cancel, postpone or switch to a virtual format. For our virtual event (which was our first Learning Circle and first virtual event), we hosted a couple of events. One was a soil health workshop using Zoom, and we hosted another session on wildlife and pollinator habitat using Microsoft Teams. Participants all introduced themselves, including technical resource specialists who presented on habitat basics, conservation-focused management practices and cost-share programs available to landowners. We also provided a virtual field tour with live stops on the host's farm. We opted to offer fewer spots for this virtual event than we would for an in-person event, simply to maintain a level

of comfort for those new to webinars and video conferencing, and to help with our level of comfort as we conducted our first virtual event. As we work to plan in-person events and reschedule postponed workshops, we are following local/state/ federal guidelines closely to ensure we are in compliance, and we are taking additional precautionary measures to provide a safe and comfortable learning environment for our participants (e.g., instructors wearing masks, encouraging participants to wear masks/providing disposable masks to those who need one, having hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes on hand, limiting the number of instructors and participants to maintain safe social distancing, spacing tables and chairs a minimum of 6 feet apart but farther if space allows, etc.).

Our promotional efforts changed as well as our event practices. We made sure to note on event flyers and in other promotions that social distancing guidelines will be adhered to during in-person events. For our virtual events, we had to increase our promotional efforts and make a point to follow up with interested participants and registrants to ensure we had good attendance.

### What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

After attending the AFT virtual training sessions I felt much more comfortable hosting my first virtual Women Caring for the Land event. I utilized Zoom and learned from the AFT training the importance of going over Zoom features in the beginning, changing Zoom display names to first names, doing introductions in alphabetical order to simulate the predictability of order in a Learning Circle, and then having the landowner host present a live tour from her farm. I would say beyond those excellent tips, one KEY thing learned (the hard way) in an unrelated virtual event earlier



this year, and emphasized in training, is to PRACTICE. I held a virtual site visit with the landowner host prior to the event, and she did a phenomenal job talking about her place and practices, so I was confident going into the event. I was also able to time how long each stop would be as well as how long it took her to move locations so that I could inform participants of when to come back after a brief break. I also spent time getting to know Zoom since Pheasants Forever utilizes a different platform for most meetings. Based on AFT's suggestion and my personal experience in virtual meetings and events, one limiting factor is definitely time. Squeezing content into less than two hours is difficult, but anything longer and I just don't think people stay attentive or engaged. Attendance was actually about the same as my in-person events, but I did have women from different states attend, which is obviously unlikely for an in-person event, particularly one absentee landowner who owned land near the host but lives out of state. This could be a worthy way to better reach absentee landowners, which is very common in North Dakota. We even had one woman join from the grain cart during harvest—ha! I am also nervous about participation in the post-survey because at in-person events I make attendees fill it out before leaving, whereas with this event I put the link in the chat box at the end and sent it via email, but I have less control over their completion. Finally, with the virtual events it will be useful to have and to share and learn from the recording.

Practice, practice, practice! As we switched gears to virtual, our instructors had a few practice sessions before the event to make sure we were comfortable with the software, knew how to use the functions like screen share, made sure microphones and cameras worked, etc. This was extremely helpful as we prepared for our event.

### What worked well?

We were pleased with the events we hosted with Zoom and with Microsoft Teams. Including videos as a virtual tour of sorts was a great addition once we figured out how to make the audio work (We did this in our practice session!). Utilizing the chat feature is great for sharing links or other comments/reminders during the virtual event. During the Learning Circle, we had all participants introduce themselves. If you need to do the same in your event, the easiest way we have found so far is to go down the participant list and call on people to speak. That eliminates people talking over each other if more than one person speaks up at a time.

### What didn't work so well?

So far so good. Aside from minor microphone issues of the participants, we have had smooth sailing!

### What surprised you?

The success of having participants introduce themselves as they would during an in-person Learning Circle. I was worried that participants would not be as comfortable speaking during a video conference as they would be in person, but I was surprised by everyone's participation! Our participants also participated in discussions throughout the event, so overall we felt that the ladies were able to connect with everyone and leave with great contacts.

## What lessons have you taken away that will inform both virtual and in-person events in the future?

I think mostly just being open to the idea of a virtual meeting when it is more fitting or strategic for the audience (e.g., absentee landowners). It is less intimidating now that I have hosted one. I would also like to experiment with going live on Facebook with an event—that had failed in my earlier unrelated virtual event. And I think in this “new normal,” virtual options or online live components will become useful and maybe even necessary at in-person events too.

Safety first! Always! These are new waters that we are all treading together, and with these circumstances, safety needs to be paramount with any events we plan. If you can't hold an event within the current safety guidelines for COVID-19, then you probably should not have the event in person and should consider your virtual options. If you can host in-person events, then take all necessary precautions to ensure a safe environment that complies with current regulations (see examples above).

Both styles of events have their value and their cost. We found virtual events easier in that we don't have to travel; we don't have venue/food/supplies expenses, they take less time; we can host virtual events more frequently; they reach more people; and so on. But you lose that really valuable in-person interaction and the hands-on experience you get at a traditional workshop. You can still succeed in having your participants interact when using a virtual platform, you just have to get creative!

## Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

The Learning Circle and energy it creates are very difficult to replicate virtually, BUT in this Women Caring for the Land event and in one of our virtual Women, Wine & Wild Game events, I was still able to feel some neat connections happening.

I found it very helpful to watch other virtual events (webinars, meetings, etc.) and to participate in those to get even more experience with the various virtual meeting platforms. I gleaned a ton of great tips just by listening in and seeing how others conducted their events.

Work with partners! We've had great experiences working with our partners who are hosting virtual events, which allows us to bring other professionals into our workshops and to contribute to virtual events they are having as well.

For a few of our virtual events, we have set up our organization's banners behind the speakers to help give a more aesthetically pleasing background when presenting in meeting rooms or office spaces. We use these at our in-person workshops and other events to promote our organization and how we work with landowners, so we figured why not set them up for virtual events as well?

Contact: Kim Cole, [kcole@quailforever.org](mailto:kcole@quailforever.org)

Rachel Bush, [rbush@pheasantsforever.org](mailto:rbush@pheasantsforever.org)

## Jean Eells, E Resources Group, LLC



Jean Eells, E Resources Group (right), at a soil health field day before COVID-19. Photo courtesy Jean Eells

### How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

All in-person professional development training for women's conservation outreach was canceled for the year and is not expected to resume. All training has been converted to virtual format.

### What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

In a 90-minute session, use of small group breakouts is beneficial and may be essential to allow people to interact with the information and remain engaged with the experience. Having a small number of participants is helpful to allow for active engagement with each other and with me as facilitator/instructor; however it may be possible in the future to manage a larger group. I felt somewhat forced to use slides to convey information in the virtual format, which is something I have chosen not to do during the in-person professional development training. I prefer to have participants experience how different the environment is where women can thrive as learners, where dialog is favored over lecture. I'm not yet convinced that virtual platforms necessarily emphasize the difference for the trainees—time will tell. For me, the loss of evaluation data discerned by watching the participants during the day is very problematic in understanding how effective the training is. Relying only on an online survey means an additional loss of data if participants don't reply.

### What lessons have you taken away that will inform both virtual and in-person events in the future?

If the audience of women landowners who are older are not likely to return to in-person meetings for a long time to come, there may be no point to training people how to host effective face-to-face meetings for women. However, the concepts of engaging women's values and passions for stewardship are essential for professionals to understand, and if virtual events continue to be viable training venues then, I will add more options to the E Resources Group, LLC portfolio. I will also be adding opportunities for women landowners to engage directly with me and with other experts through services I will develop.

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**Contact:** Jean Eells, [jeanceells@gmail.com](mailto:jeanceells@gmail.com), (515) 297-0701



## PROFILE

## Lisa Kivirist, MOSES (formerly with In Her Boots)

### How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/ demonstrations) efforts this year?

We adapted our three in-person events (Women Caring for the Land events and In Her Boots on-farm workshops) into three virtual events/webinars:

- June 18, 2020: Resources for Cultivating Conservation (panel)
- July 28, 2020: How to Set Priorities & Manage Time with Charlotte Smith, 3 Cow Marketing
- August 18, 2020: She's Got Your Back: Tap into a Support Network with Denise O'Brien, Rolling Acres

### What worked well?

The chat function worked much better to engage and have interaction amongst attendees versus live discussion/Q&A. We encouraged women to introduce themselves and their farm in the beginning of the session. We learned the chat takes time to “warm up” (nobody wants to be the first). We experimented for a later session and asked some women farmers we knew who had registered for the event to jump in and get the chat going quickly in the beginning. They were happy to do that, and it made a huge difference in interactions. We did hear from women very appreciative of the virtual format as they are not able to attend in-person events due to farm commitments and family responsibilities. We saw several moms with babies on their laps (on mute!) who could readily attend something like this.

“We did hear from women very appreciative of the virtual format as they are not able to attend in-person events due to farm commitments and family responsibilities.”

We learned it is difficult (and frankly unnecessary) to try to be “everything” in a virtual event. That was a frustrating realization as we can cover, and historically have covered, so much ground at in-person field days, including prioritizing and fostering networking and social connections. While the chat function was helpful, it also by default caused dual things going on simultaneously: someone presenting and discussions going on in the chat, which might be on a totally different topic. We learned it's important to have the

### What didn't work so well?

speaker focus strictly on the information and not get distracted by the chat. Having one person officially host and keep an eye on the chat and having another team member be the tech support (with ample bandwidth) worked much better. Remember: attendees register to hear the advertised speaker and topic, therefore keep your introduction and other information short. We learned this via survey feedback.



Lisa Kivirist, MOSES (formerly with In Her Boots)

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speaker focus strictly on the information and not get distracted by the chat. Having one person officially host and keep an eye on the chat and having another team member be the tech support (with ample bandwidth) worked much better. Remember: attendees register to hear the advertised speaker and topic, therefore keep your introduction and other information short. We learned this via survey feedback.



## What surprised you?

By going virtual with a free event, we by default immediately cast the attendee net much wider, both geographically and background. While inherently it's great to have wider outreach, this could be a challenge moving forward with specific grant and program deliverable goals that need to address a specific audience. For example, we are the "Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service." Does it support our mission if we have attendees from New Zealand (which we did)?

These will be increasingly important questions to address in the future related to virtual event outcomes. We had higher participation of educator/agency women than what is typical at our events. Additionally, we did have a handful of male attendees. (That would not have been typical of our in-person events.)



A pre-COVID event for women farmers on the subject of cover crops, hosted by MOSES. Photo by Jean Andreasen, North Central SARE

## What lessons have you taken away that will inform both virtual and in-person events in the future?

Not surprisingly, attendees register last minute for these events. About a third of attendees registered two days prior to the event. Having the ability to view the webinar online afterwards on one's own timeline understandably expands outreach. We found virtual events/webinars are an easier fit when it comes to pure informational exchange, i.e., speakers presenting information.

It is a challenge to create more "intimate, safe space" virtually for women to really ask more personal questions and directly engage.

Even though there is definite excitement and urgency around hosting a virtual event live, we're realizing it's important to see these as lasting, "evergreen" resources online. About one third of registered attendees did not attend live but watched later.

We hosted all three of these events at 1 pm CST, both wanting consistency in timing for them all and

thinking the early afternoon/after lunch might be a conducive time slot. We would love more insight comparing other timing situations if there might be better options (although evening events would be a challenge for agency and other organizational speakers and support).

Hosting these in the winter/early spring may encourage better attendance. We had the most attendees at our June event and our lowest at the last event in August. This may also have to do with

"Zoom fatigue" and the fact that such resources were "new and shiny" earlier in the season and then became more commonplace.

Presenting virtually is a skillset, and it isn't necessarily something that is immediately transferable from other settings (e.g., someone who may do fine presenting in a large room via a PowerPoint on a screen can't just take that same format and run with it online necessarily). PowerPoint slides should be much simpler and have less content, as attendees are viewing on their computer or even on phones.

## Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with utilizing virtual engagement tools while serving your particular audience/constituency?

We offered these sessions all free of charge, as just about all online farming resources to date have been. While this definitely opens up attendance enthusiasm, I am concerned on how paying for virtual events will be perceived in the future, especially events like conferences going online, as there is now an established expectation that virtual events are free. Typically, we charged \$25–\$50 for our all-day, on-farm In Her Boots workshops (including lunch), which attendees paid and felt was a solid value. Having a "tech rehearsal" a few days/weeks prior to the actual event was key for all parties involved. Presenters with varying levels of internet bandwidth need to check to make sure all is working well. We sometimes found that running a presenter's audio through their phone was much better quality than their computer microphone (but this required testing/practicing ahead of time as most folks were not familiar with this).

Don't look at webinars in isolation, but instead integrate them with other programming and resources. With our Resilience Boot Camp, we also had podcasts and a weekly e-newsletter that we could draw from and direct folks to.

Contact: Lisa Kivistik, [lisakivistik@gmail.com](mailto:lisakivistik@gmail.com)

"Even though there is definite excitement and urgency around hosting a virtual event live, we're realizing it's important to see these as lasting, 'evergreen' resources online.

About one third of registered attendees did not attend live but watched later."

## PROFILE

## WFAN Women Caring for the Land and Women, Land & Legacy, Wren Almitra

### How did COVID-19 change your outreach (workshops/field tours/demonstrations) efforts this year?

All of our in-person Women Caring for the Land Learning Circles were canceled and converted to online events. Considering we've been holding face-to-face Learning Circles since 2008, this forced a significant shift in both our planning and promotion processes, as well as how we think about ways to connect on a personal level and share needed information with our target audiences. Our Women, Land & Legacy program, which operates through local chapters throughout Iowa, saw all programming cancelled. For the first time in that program's 16-year history we coordinated statewide educational and networking meetings, which were held virtually—again, a first for this program.

### What are some key things you learned from pivoting to a virtual platform?

For Women Caring for the Land, we started from scratch because none of our in-person events used a digital lecture format or PowerPoint slides to disseminate information. We learned how to handle the logistics for Zoom meetings for large and small groups and breakout rooms; we learned, and are still learning, the best time duration of an online meeting; we learned how to handle the key soil health demonstrations via video; and we adapted for online polling/surveys for evaluation data. For one series of meetings our meeting participation size was intentionally limited to mimic our in-person meetings. For another pair of meetings, we advertised to a nationwide audience. We saw different benefits to both formats.

We were relieved that for the most part the facilitation seemed to transfer fairly well in creating a conversational atmosphere where questions could be asked more or less in real time in the Zoom chat function, by unmuting themselves or raising hands, and in small breakout rooms. For the series of meetings with limited participants, the magic of a small number of women getting to know each other by introductions worked reasonably well, more so if they were willing to turn on their cameras and be seen. If they didn't engage right at the beginning by having their cameras turned on, we didn't get as much interaction and had a little bit of attrition for reasons we are uncertain of. We were surprised at their interest in continuing to talk with us and each other as long as half an hour after an event was over.

For the meeting attracting a nationwide audience, there were these benefits:

- Breakout rooms were appreciated and were an effective modeling of in-person meetings in regards to networking and sharing



A WFAN Women Caring for the Land event held in Kentucky pre-COVID. Photo courtesy Wren Almitra, WFAN

resources (though these still did not meet the quality of in-person networking).

- We are seeing higher increases in pre-registrations overall with a 50% or so corresponding drop-off in actual attendees. We are still pleased with the turnout.
- We are seeing an increased national reach, which is effective in connecting with more women and in showcasing our innovative programming that focuses on education, empowerment and networking, now across states.
- Surveys so far have been positive; we seem to be continuing effectively in sharing information (with post-event actions taken yet to be determined).

### What lessons have you taken away that will inform both virtual and in-person events in the future?

We will try future virtual events without limitations of group size or geographic area, and we will try to limit the amount of content to maintain the opportunity to ask experts questions and have a more leisurely interaction. We may also continue fostering small group models of virtual connection.

Contact: Wren Almitra, [wren@wfan.org](mailto:wren@wfan.org) or [info@wfan.org](mailto:info@wfan.org)

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## It Takes a Network

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**Authors:** Ashley Brucker (AFT), Beth Holtzman, (University of Vermont), Caitlin Joseph (AFT) and Gabrielle Roesch-McNally (AFT)

**Case study contributors:** Cayla Bendel (Pheasants Forever), Jean Eells (E Resources Group and Women Food and Agriculture Network), Lisa Kivirist (In Her Boots, Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service), Elizabeth Lillard (Women in Conservation Leadership, National Wildlife Federation), and Maggie Norton (Practical Farmers of Iowa)

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