

Supporting Women  
Landowners and  
Farmers in Adopting  
Prairie Strips:  
Learning Circle Lessons  
Learned

2022



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY



The research summarized in this report was conducted as part of the STRIPS project and was funded by the Bia-Echo Foundation. This report is a collaboration between the STRIPS project and American Farmland Trust.

STRIPS stands for Science-based Trials of Row crops Integrated with Prairie Strips. Since 2007, the long-term project has been measuring the impacts of strategically planting prairie strips in crop fields at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge in Prairie City, Iowa. Results have shown that small amounts of prairie can yield disproportionate, multifunctional benefits to soils, watersheds, wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

Find more information on the STRIPS project online at <http://www.prairiestrips.org>. Learn more about American Farmland Trust's Women for the Land program at [www.farmland.org/women](http://www.farmland.org/women).

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# Introduction

American Farmland Trust’s Women for the Land Initiative hosted four Learning Circles with women farmers, landowners, and aspiring farmers, including a cadre of technical service providers, from November 2021-May 2022.

The Learning Circles were virtual meetings that lasted between 90-120 minutes with a focus on introducing participants to the idea of integrating native prairie plants and/or prairie strips on their agricultural land(s).

The agenda included a technical overview of what prairie and prairie strips are, how to get started, and how to access resources from USDA and other sources. In *Table 1*, we present the anticipated outcomes used to inform the design of the Learning Circles. During the Learning Circles, we collected input on two overarching questions:

1. What most excites you about the potential benefits of prairie on your land/in your operation?
2. What challenges do you think you might face in looking to integrate prairie into your operation/on your land?

Following the initial Learning Circles, the project team determined that more time was needed to discuss these questions in depth. We thus hosted an additional listening session in June of 2022 to gain further input.

This report synthesizes the quantitative findings from the Learning Circle registration data and post event evaluation survey, qualitative data gleaned from Learning Circle discussions and listening session, and highlights and recommendations for future outreach to women farmers and landowners.

Table 1. Learning Circle anticipated outcomes and associated Women for the Land objectives.

Meeting Outcomes	Linkage to Women for the Land Objective
Women increase knowledge of resources regarding integrating prairie on their land/farm, including prairie strips practice Local resource providers able to better reach women landowners and farmers	Parity
Women increase confidence to engage in decision-making around utilizing prairie, and/or prairie strips on farm or farmland	Power & Solidarity (Networks)
Women increase their knowledge, skills, and awareness of resilience-promoting practices such as prairie restoration and prairie strips Women increase their intention to implement resilience-promoting practices such as prairie strips	Resilience

# Results

## Registration and Evaluation Data

Across all four Learning Circles, we experienced a high demand for the content with a total of 253 registrants. Out of those registrants, 70 attended (technical service providers, farmers and landowners); all registrants had access to meeting recordings and supplemental materials thus we expect our reach included all 253 registrants. See *Table 2* for a full accounting of the participant make-up for each Learning Circle.

Our collective response rate for all Learning Circle evaluation surveys, sent immediately following the event, was 29%. Data were aggregated across all four Learning Circles to capture broader trends and insights. In terms of participation by role, 8 farmers, 7 landlords, 6 aspiring farmers, and 7 resource providers responded. We asked a series of questions related to confidence, intentions to act, and desire for future engagement.

We received responses to our optional demographic survey from all but two of our respondents. All 18 who responded identified as Female. The majority were 50 years of age or older. The majority reported some college and, of those, eight reported a graduate degree or at least some post-undergraduate work.

Table 2. Learning Circle event and participation details

State(s)	Number Registrants	Number Participants	Number Acres Represented	Type of participant By Role	Partners
WI/MN	44	13	1415	3 conservation resource professionals; 4 current farmers who own land they farm; 1 former farmer; 1 new/beginning farmer, 1 inheritor of farmland; and 2 who lease owned farmland	University of Wisconsin-Extension, UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center, Sand County Foundation (and partner farmer Nancy Kavanjian), Renewing the Countryside, and NRCS and FSA guests
MI	60	27	1128	5 conservation resource professionals; 7 current farmers who own land they farm; 1 new/beginning farmer; 1 non-operating landlord	MISTRIPS, Van Buren Conservation District, and MSU Extension
NE/KS	60	20	3347	9 conservation resource professionals; 4 current farmers who own land they farm; 4 inheritors of farmland; and 1 spouse of former farmer	University of Nebraska-Lincoln, UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center, Nebraska Women in Ag and had partners from NRCS and SWCDs join
IL/MO	89	9	1031	1 current farmer who owns land they farm; 1 non-operating landlord; 4 inheritors of farmland; and 3 others	Missouri Prairie Foundation and the UNI Tallgrass Prairie Center and USDA NRCS attendee

All identified as White. Half of respondents did not report receiving any income or a small amount of income from their farm, with six reporting no sales from land and another four earning \$10,000 or less in gross farm income. The majority of our respondents reported being farmer owner/operators of farmland or technical service providers, other participants play other roles on the farm (including 9 who said they were going to inherit land, 2 others reported that they were non-operating landlords).

### Improved Confidence & Taking Action

From the survey, we see that confidence increased across the board (Figure 1). Individuals especially gained confidence in “discussing financial and technical assistance opportunities tied to integrating prairie or prairie strips on their land” and in “describing my goals for what I want to do with my farm or farmland with regard to integrating prairie.”

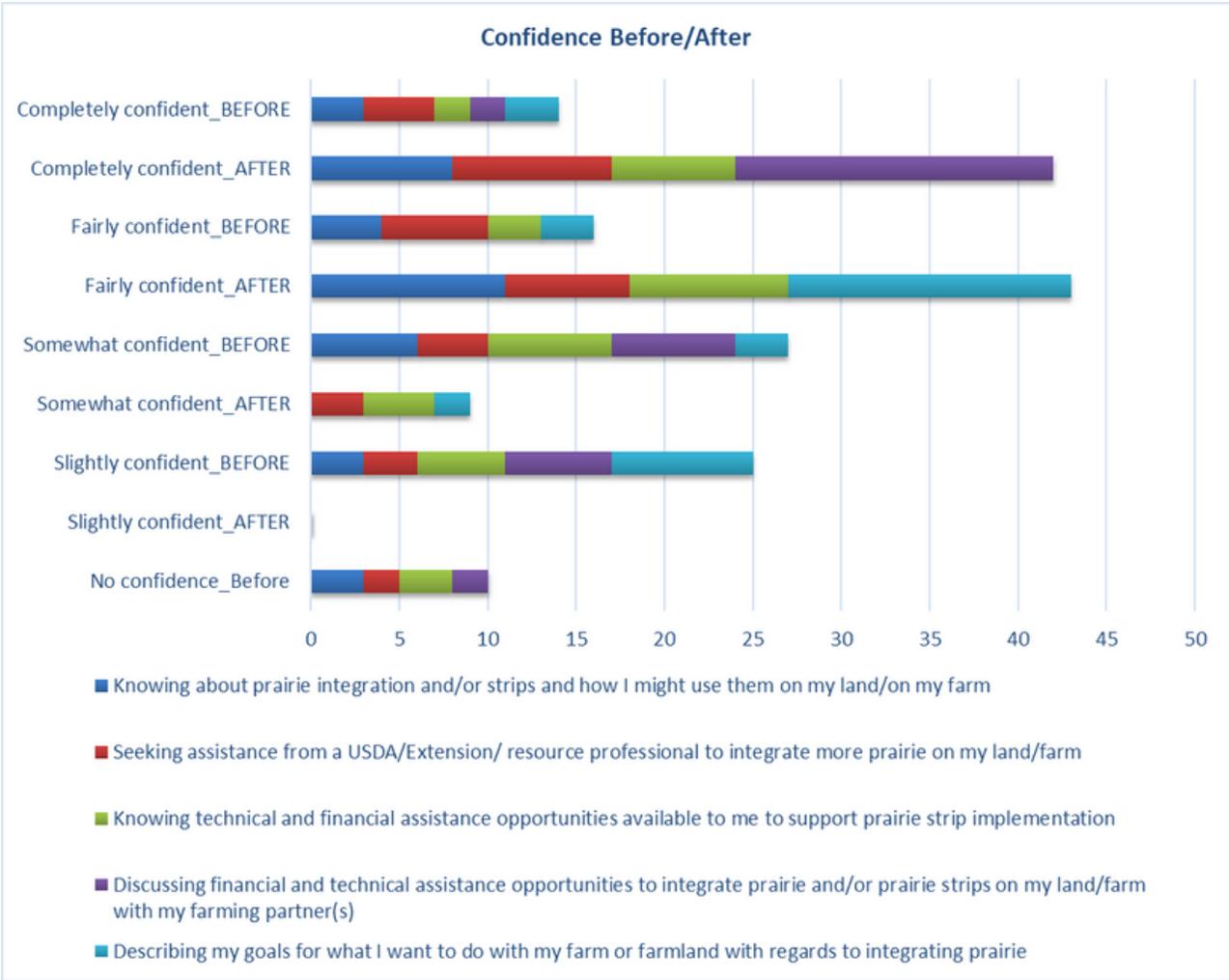


Figure 1. Confidence levels before and after attending Learning Circle (n=20)

In terms of acting as a result of participating in the Learning Circle, the majority of respondents indicated that they were likely to very likely to take action as a result of participating in the Learning Circle. The majority were planning on obtaining additional information on how to better support their farm management goals, and they were also likely to contact a service provider or other participant that they met at the Learning Circle (Figure 2).

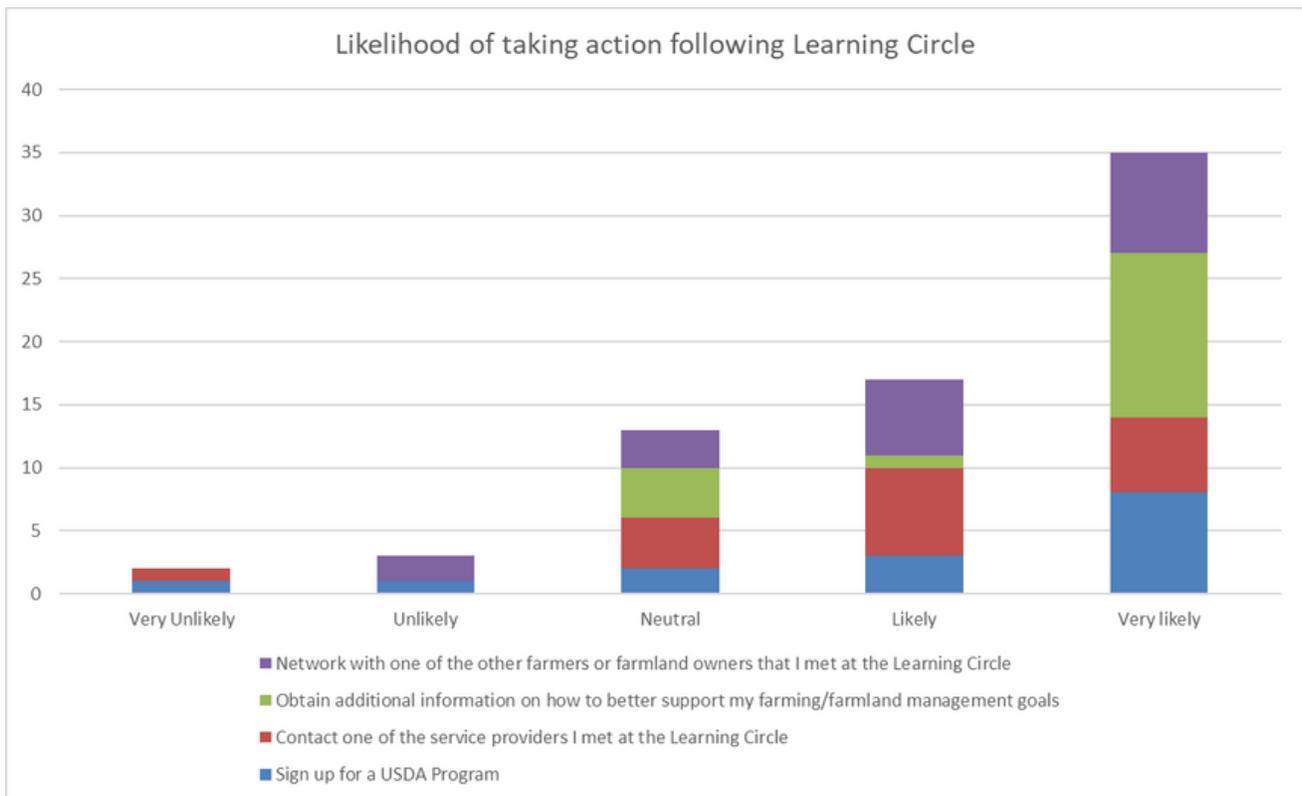


Figure 2. Likelihood to act following the Learning Circle (n=20)

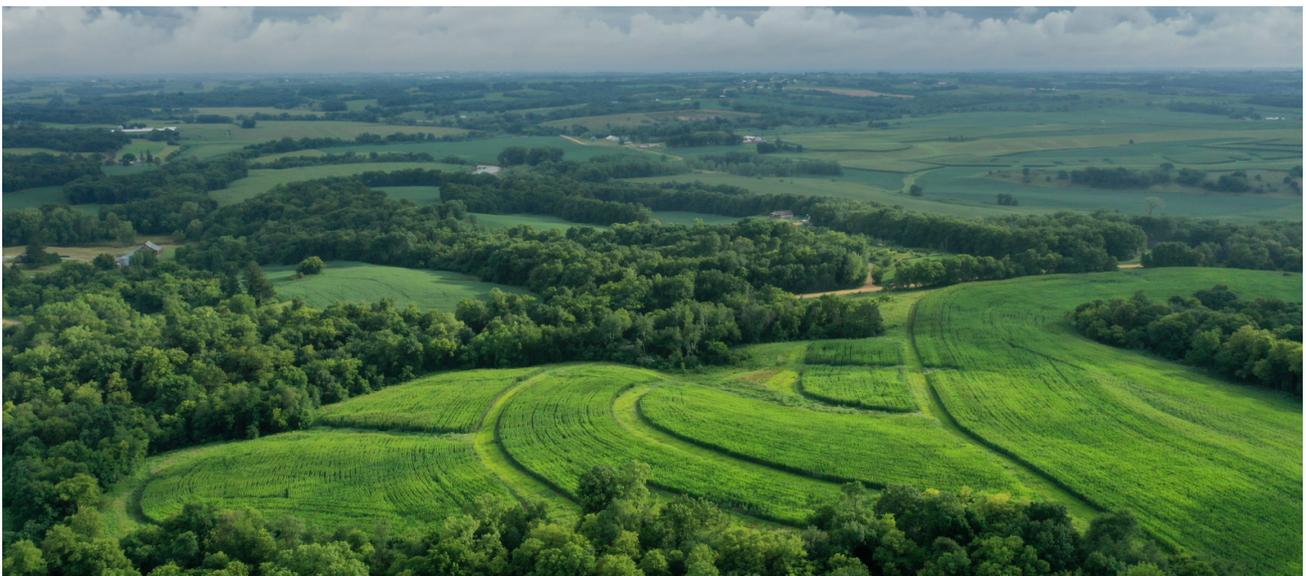
## Staying Involved

When asked how they would like to stay involved moving forward, all respondents indicated they wanted to stay engaged in the following ways:

- Participating in meetings or gatherings (in-person or virtual) (16 responses)
- Online forum for resource sharing (13 responses)
- List-serve or email distribution list (12 responses)
- Hosting meetings or gatherings (in-person or virtual) (6 responses)

Finally, when asked to provide any final reflections, respondents gave some positive feedback on their experiences (bullets are direct quotes from respondents):

- "As a beginning farmer with a limited circle of farmer colleagues/friends, it is great to meet my peers, especially other WOMEN, and those in my area. Networking like this is crucial."
- "Excellent presentation. I planted 4 acres of native prairie several years ago with the help of Pheasants Forever. All went well until the invasive silver maple trees took over. A nursing home was built at edge of our project. It was not safe to burn. Sadly, the project is now back to crop production. I would like to try again in another location on farm. Perhaps prairie strips?"
- "Interesting presentation but wish there would be a follow-up with more technical info."
- "Thank you for all the work that you do."
- "Thank you for the Circle! I am encouraged to use prairie strips!"
- "Very interesting content -- thanks!"
- "Very well done"



# Discussion and Listening Session Data

During the Learning Circles, we discussed challenges and benefits associated with prairie strips during a brief breakout session. An additional listening session was held June, 2022 to garner further input. All sessions were recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai. The following represents a qualitative synthesis from all the sessions described.

## Challenges

The choice of whether to adopt prairie strips are just one facet among diverse needs, interests, and challenges that women farmers and landowners face. Women are navigating various challenges, some of which are related to gendered barriers, while other factors might directly influence their management and subsequent ability to integrate prairie on their land.

Some of these challenges include:

- Challenges associated with being a new and/or beginning farmer- women who are just getting started and have a lot of needs, but some see prairie as something unique to bring to their operations. These beginning farmers have a lot of additional needs related to their new and beginning status.
- Dynamics on rented lands (particularly with male tenants or family ownership dynamics)- women are figuring out how to navigate different priorities when managing land with spouses or other family as illustrated by the following direct quotes:
  - “And for me the toughest part is talking to our tenant to saying, ‘Hey, this is what we want you to do for us.’ And it's kind of a difficult conversation to have, considering the first and only time I've actually met him was at my dad's funeral.”
  - “I wonder if, you know, part of it can be like a gender dynamic, you know, like, I feel like women are so conditioned to like, not trouble people and not ask for things. I wonder if it's, you know, if male landowners would find it easier to you know, ask or tell tenant farmers to do something and I just think that is sort of a unique challenge that we have this woman sometimes is asking for very reasonable things.”





Other challenges were related to the management or establishment of prairie strips themselves, including:

- Concerns about establishment and maintenance (burning, mowing, invasive species management).
- Wanting tools and resources on prairie burning and other hands-on workshops to gain skills that would build confidence in direct management (from establishment to early management and troubleshooting).
- Challenge with navigating so many programs and resources, where to start, and concerns about not always being eligible for government programs.
- Extension and NRCS came up as important resources that some are already navigating, Pheasants Forever and some other local non-profits were also mentioned, as described in the following quote:
  - “My kind of frustration is that it seems like there are a lot of, there's a lot of overlap in a lot of different programs and organizations. And you can kind of get overwhelmed or fall in a rabbit hole when you're trying to find which one's more appropriate, which ones fit?”
- Some organic producers are interested in prairie strips but are not sure if prairie strips can be managed without herbicides.
- A number of women reported that they run smaller operations, with more diversity in their cropping systems than is typical of farms in the region. They wondered how prairie and prairie strips might fit into their unique operations, particularly those that are not growing row crops.
- Invasive species came up a lot, with some participants indicating they had failed in prairie establishment because of invasive encroachment , as described in the following quote:
  - “I think my main concerns are just invasives that are already pretty well established, and water runoff [concerns]...And with it being just me and a large area, it's really hard to maintain. So that I think is my biggest concern. I don't want to take the time, money, and efforts and then it just not be enough time, money, and effort for the problem.”

## Benefits

Women participants were excited about the potential for prairie strips and were specifically interested in some of the following benefits:

- Pollinator habitat
- Increasing on-farm diversity and interest in diverse seed mixes
- Improving wildlife habitat
- Grazing potential
- Potential to take land that is less productive out of production (e.g., corner pivots)
- Aesthetic values.



“And I have enjoyed watching how the inclusion of diversity has brought animals around how I have fewer problems with the screen that is right next to my house. And it just looks much nicer. It really does. And by the way, those beneficial animals and insects and whatnot, they helped me in making my farming situation better.”

-Participant who has experimented with prairie

# Recommendations

Bringing prairie back to farmland in the Midwest is still a novel concept in many ways. Our preliminary work inspires key recommendations that should inform outreach efforts with women farmers/landowners, but many of the recommendations are likely relevant to male farmers/landowners and technical assistance providers.

Many of the challenges raised in the section above point to universal challenges, which are not likely driven by gendered issues per se. However, women did raise concerns about trying to convince their renter or spouse in doing this prairie “thing” and they were seeking additional support to help them make the case for prairie. Participants wanted to gain more confidence and clearly seemed to value the curated resources made available at the Learning Circle. Technical assistance providers need more training on prairie establishment and management as well. They often joined because they wanted to learn more to better help farmer and farm landowner clients with adopting new practices.

Information about the prairie strips conservation practice is extending to a wider agricultural audience in the Midwest, but many people still have questions as to whether it will work for them and their land/operation. Despite years of activity in providing outreach and technical support to farmers and farm landowners, even the Iowa State University STRIPS team and partners are still figuring out how to build their programmatic outreach most effectively. Considering these reflections and the broader findings, we suggest the following next steps to guide our work in future years of the grant:

- Focus on developing hands-on workshops that connect to active management of prairie strips.
- Develop targeted outreach for women non-operating landowners to help them navigate conversations with spouses, tenants, and others to make the case for how/why prairie might make sense for their land.
- Focus targeted training on technical assistance providers, perhaps with a focus on women, so that they can better serve those in their communities who are seeking support in assessing whether prairie is right for their land and operation.



## Acknowledgements

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