

CST Oct 28, 214. Editor's headline: "**Big benefits from efforts to empower women in agriculture**"

Just as some families never get around to setting up a budget or developing a five-year or ten-year plan, so some farmers and ranchers never implement a business plan with cash-flow balance sheets, or think through transition plans, or write down employee directives. Annie's Project seeks to address this gap by empowering women in agriculture to develop skills of problem solving, record keeping, and decision-making. Inasmuch as I must involve myself proactively in the farmland I own south of Wheatland, I signed up for the course. Learning to manage and organize critical information is valuable at any age; I hope that, on completing the program, all participants will have become the competent, self-confident business—and family—leaders we knew we could be.

The workshop covers its subjects through speakers versant in their professions. For example, Lucy Pauley explained how and when to seek mediation through the Wyoming Agricultural and Natural Resource Program. Wendy Madsen discussed Wyoming's legislative branch of government, explained how to read a bill, and encouraged us to attend committee meetings dealing with pertinent subjects. Her presentation ended with a lively discussion of Matt Teeters' disingenuous amendment to last session's budget bill that put on hold implementation of NextGen science standards in Wyoming's schools.

A session on farm and ranch transition strategies presented each participant with a booklet bearing examples of retiring ranchers and farmers who have worked out their children's succession. Since ranchers and farmers tend to employ family members, life is often fraught with conflicted family dynamics. Learning to creatively tackle resolutions helps immensely.

Annie's Project workshops consist of 18 hours of interaction, spread over six three-hour sessions typically offered in the evening. Each session begins with an evening meal. The project in which I'm enrolled moved from Cheyenne's Archer Complex to LCCC, where the college's catering service provides scrumptious dinners. In the introductory session, twelve participants, some young, some not-so-young, gave brief outlines of their experiences with cattle and crop operations large and small.

The project is named after Annie (Annette) Fleck, who grew up in a small town in Northern Illinois and spent a lifetime, learning to be an involved partner with her farmer husband. Her daughter has taken Annie's experiences to share with women who must operate agricultural businesses. To date, classes have been taught in 34 states, and Wyoming has successfully offered workshops in a number of counties.

To offer an Annie's Project, facilitating educators must go through training by the originators of the program, the Iowa State University Extension. In 2011 Cole Ehmke, Extension Specialist at University of Wyoming's Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, assembled a proposal to the USDA Risk Management Agency, seeking funding for training in Annie's Project and for offering the workshops.

Tammie Jensen, UW Extension educator in Lusk, collaborated with Mr. Ehmke in bringing Annie's to Wyoming. Each had heard about the program from different sources and thought it useful for their clientele. Both worked with Wyoming Women in Agriculture. Mr. Ehmke contacted the Annie's Project office at Iowa State and later arranged training for a group of Wyoming educators. "The first programs happened in Lusk and in Torrington," he says. "The reception was great. The ladies loved the interaction and the mix of topics."

In the Lusk-based class, January and February of 2012, a total of 16 women participated. Topics included goal setting, lending, strategic marketing, non-titled property transfer, financial statements, enterprise budgets, farming with disabilities, exploring new markets, and business transfer and succession. In the Torrington-based class, also held around that time, a total of 24 women participated. "These places have had the longest (and perhaps most enthusiastic) offerings of Annie's," says Mr. Ehmke.

A second-level Annie's Project, "Managing for Today and Tomorrow," was recently offered in Niobrara county. Another second-level program is slated for the Wind River Indian Reservation. Second level teaches business, estate, and retirement planning, and how to manage farm and ranch transitions.

In our sessions, one presenter went grossly over the time allotted for her talk. I think she should have been reminded that her time was up, just as participants are reminded with an ringing clock when our break is up. The speaker's ho-hum talk on social media grievously cut into Ms. Pauley's presentation on the importance of conflict resolution through mediation.

At the cusp of concluding the course, I regret that time constraints have allowed little interaction among participants. We have been unable to share insights that would have enriched the class experience and added to the social fabric of our community. As happens in other teaching situations, perceived curriculum demands tend to trump personal interaction. Still, the training was helpful and is to be recommended.