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featuring
**OREGON STATE
UNIVERSITY
WOW NETWORK**



SUCCESS SERIES

In 2005 Oregon State University Forestry and Natural Resources Extension brought together a female forest landowner steering committee to develop Oregon's Women Owning Woodlands Network. This is their success story.

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FEATURING OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY'S WOMEN OWNING WOODLANDS NETWORK.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SUSTAINING FAMILY FORESTS INITIATIVE, WITH A GRANT FROM THE US FOREST SERVICE, STATE AND PRIVATE FORESTRY.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE...

She had lost her husband two years before. He was always the one to do the forest management stuff while she managed horses! Now she was left without a clue of how she should manage the forest. Her plan was to just - let it be. Accompanying her friend who invited her on an informal Oregon WOWNet hike changed everything and left her in tears of relief. After talking with women on the hike who are managing forests on their own, she said she felt like she could do it too. She instantly felt she had a support network and a huge barrier was lifted. It's amazing what a walk in the woods, with peers, can do!

AN IDEA BORNE OUT OF NEED

In 2005 at Oregon State University (OSU) Forestry and Natural Resources Extension, Nicole Strong was the only female extension forester on staff.



OSU was not unique in this regard. In fact, at the time, the forestry workforce and forest landowner base were male-dominated. Many women felt marginalized and were often in the back of the room and disengaged if they attended forestry programs at all. Nicole attended an Oregon Woodland Owner Association forestry tour and a group of five women in the back of a truck mentioned having their own group, so they could talk about this stuff and ask the “stupid” questions.



Nicole ran with that. She knew women were playing an increasing role in forest management and ownership and said, “Just because most of them are not out there running a chainsaw, they are still managers.” She researched the increasing number of women landowners, reflected on a Pennsylvania group that did a women’s workshop she attended, and she built her ideas for Oregon WOWNet.

IDEAS INTO ACTION

Ideas into action

In 2005 Oregon State University (OSU) Forestry and Natural Resources Extension brought together a female forest landowner steering committee to develop Oregon’s Women Owning Woodlands Network (WOWNet). This Extension program was designed to:

- a) recognize the growing number of women taking a wide array of active woodland management roles,
- b) raise basic forestry and decision-making skill levels among women woodland managers through hands-on educational opportunities,
- c) support and increase women’s access to forestry-related resources, and
- d) encourage communication among Oregon’s women woodland managers through the development of statewide and local networks.

In its first four years, this program grew to include over 300 members in nine counties, holding 24 - 36 local programs per year.



ABOUT OSU

Tiffany Hopkins, who now coordinates the OSU program says that “Oregon WOWNet is a peer learning group, so we focus on participants being able to learn from one another. We put value on the knowledge they bring to the table.” Typically, experts come and do a presentation or interactive learning experience, but then always incorporate time for questions, learning, and sharing. That is what sets WOWNet apart from other forestry education programs that women attend. Most of the WOW groups nationally strive toward that goal because anecdotes and peer-reviewed research say women are looking for a community they are a part of and fit into. One OSU WOWNet program member said,

“ I don't have a lot of other women friends who want to talk to me about trees. I come here for that.”

OSU WOWNet offers different types of workshops:

- Weekend retreats for women all over the state.
- Localized events, which are in a specific county, with local participants.

The program currently has about 150 members, spanning 18 Oregon counties. Some areas are more developed, and some counties just have a few women who are interested. For those more scattered, they might just come to retreats, or participate virtually, or drive very far, or get together with each other. 2017 had 6 local workshops. Retreats are every other year.



BARRIERS THEN AND NOW

Starting and maintaining programs are not simple tasks. For Oregon WOWNet, Nicole remembers starting out, “Our biggest barrier was overcoming the concern that we would be competing with other resources or fragmenting the community. Early on, there was a feeling that there was only a limited amount of landowner support or engagement to go around.”

In response, we were very thoughtful about articulating program goals and strategies that complemented existing programs, and focused on engaging women landowners with our other resources, educational programs, technical assistance, and landowner organizations. After the first year or two, we all realized that the more inclusive you become, the more your support and community grows. In fact, the WOWNet program fostered a more holistic view of forest management, which broadened the field of beneficiaries.”

After a few years, the barrier shifted to leadership capacity. Nicole said, “We just couldn’t get participants comfortable leading and organizing events, they always wanted an ‘expert’ there.”

Today, barriers still exist and the WOWNet program works hard to break them down, with increasing success. The top three challenges Tiffany sees are:

“ We offer a welcoming and comfortable network regardless of a participant’s level of management knowledge or experience.

- Tiffany Hopkins



1. How women view themselves. She said, “We would have more women in our network if women could identify easier as a woodland owner or manager. Most don’t identify that way.”

2. A lack of confidence in making management decisions. Tiffany explains, “This stems from a lack of knowledge or education around particular management areas. Women come to us to build that education and knowledge base in an environment that feels comfortable to them.

3. The same lack of confidence at other educational events and workshops. Many women won’t ask questions, or they feel like they will be viewed as dumb or stupid, so they don’t participate actively outside of the WOWNet experiences and resources.

Tiffany says these barriers are generally present across the nation. She started a WOW group in West Virginia in graduate school and recalls many similarities. On a whole nationally, “We are trying to break this down. We offer a welcoming and comfortable network regardless of a participant’s level of management knowledge or experience,” said Tiffany. The results take time to manifest, and the Oregon WOWNet is soon to publish results regarding the program’s impact. Nicole shared that, “We are seeing an increase in management actions. For example, women who have written a management plan, managed invasive species, assessed forest health, and conducted a harvest. In addition, women are increasing furthering their stewardship education by attending other woodland owner events, contacting forestry professionals, joining their woodland owner associations, and more, based on their initial participation in WOWNet.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

According to Tiffany, key aspects to success are:

1. Helping people identify accurately from the start, by naming your program “Women Owning Woodlands” or something similar,
2. The peer learning, so people have an opportunity to be the “expert” and learn from others with similar backgrounds, and
3. General education, provided through different opportunities to participate at various levels, so people can feel comfortable talking about the topics. Offer whatever you can for free, using common language. “We instill the confidence of knowledge, so they can talk about different issues and go to workshops and speak about this stuff,” Tiffany says. “So many women say they feel confident going to other forestry events or becoming part of the Oregon Forest Owners Network because they went to the WOWNet workshops first.

ADVICE TO PEERS

Tiffany and Nicole offer the following pieces of advice to anyone thinking of starting a WOW program in their area:

1. Especially in places where there isn’t much support or knowledge of the need already, be prepared for the push back, and know it is worth the struggle.



Tiffany said, “I had worked with Oregon WOWNet as a volunteer and there was a lot of support. I thought when I went to West Virginia to start something, everyone would think it was as great as I did. They didn’t, at first. But, as soon as you offer a successful program, it is mind-blowing how much positive energy comes out of the workshops.”

2. Find a couple of women who are passionate about it and start there. They will motivate you to keep going and remind you that people are interested. They will help you find others who are interested. The rest of the stuff starts to fall together after that. They will help you get through inertia, naysayers, and small budgets.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE...

A wife of a retired forester always figured he had a head start on her regarding aspects of woodland management. She didn’t know about WOWNet before she went through a Master Woodland Manager (MWM) Program, striving to learn and “catch up.” Then, she attended WOWNet workshops to learn even more. She didn’t have a management plan when she started. Now she does. She hosted a WOWNet workshop and talked to others about management planning. She shared her plan, walked to those areas of her property, and pointed stuff out to workshop participants.

Now, she has taught so many, so much about forest management, all of it from someone who thought her husband knew more than she ever could, because of his head start.

Surprise success!



In addition to realized goals, success can come in the form of pleasant surprises. The most rewarding may be friendship and community. Many landowners are either coming back to rural living or are new to it. In that environment, it can be hard to make friends and build a social support network. WOWNet serves the same role as other community centers, such as churches. Their love of the land establishes common values, and they grow from there.

Oregon WOWNet wants to reach more women in the less active, more rural counties. Funding, travel, and coordination there is more difficult. There appear to be fewer women interested too, so the effort to impact ratio is difficult. WOWNet is hoping to pilot a program this year for interested local women to coordinate and run those events. These “spark plug ladies” will be experts in their area.

