

## **Multi-cultural Women-in-Ag: *Network Building and Collective Farm***

### Michigan Food & Farming Systems

This story begins in the fall of 2012. A group of multi-cultural women growers from Genesee County approached Michelle Napier-Dunnings (MIFFS Executive Director) and asking, "What is MIFFS doing to support women farmers?" Michelle's response..."What do you want us to do?"

The representative group began meeting and developed a pilot network of women in agriculture (WIA) on the east side of the state with ideas and suggestions they had gathered. As this network was meeting and growing, a second effort was focusing on finding a place and partners for a multi-cultural Women-in-Ag incubator farm site. The group had a number of unsuccessful starts, but finally landed at Genesys Health Park, just outside of Flint, Michigan. Erin Caudell, one of the network leaders and a local farmer and employee of Genesys Health System, worked with Genesys Hospital to include a new WIA Incubator Site as part of Genesys' long-term strategic plan.

A local engineering firm completed a survey of the site and Adam Ingrao, MIFFS Council Member and MSU Entomology Ph.D. student took soil samples. We also did a walk around with Genesee County Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff during a season of unusual rainfall. MIFFS submitted paperwork to receive a farm number from USDA FSA and then completed the AD1026 form, requesting a wetland & highly erodible land determination by NRCS.

The soil samples analyzed identified soils typical of that region and quite problematic both in terms of soil quality (clay) and soil content (low in potassium and phosphorus). Because the field had not been farmed for years (estimates as high as 20 years), we had assumed the organic content would be ideal. This was not the case. The most prolific sign of productivity were the invasive plants that now posed an additional issue of, "how to remove them in order to grow crops" using the WIA Network's agreed upon methodology of implementing organic practices. The WIA Network along with support from Michigan State University Extension planted a cover crop of sorghum sudan grass.

NRCS returned a report stating that the land is NOT a wetland or highly erodible, allowing us to proceed and to access USDA programs in the future. The USDA staff attended multiple meetings to discuss conservation planning, and by the end of October a WIA Farm Development Center Conservation Plan will be completed.

The relationships between the Genesee County USDA FSA & NRCS staff and the WIA Network have grown. Communications are occurring weekly. The staff has kept the group informed on deadlines and opportunities that will benefit this farm and the beginning farmers that will be growing there next season. MIFFS staff have formed strong working relationships and experienced first-hand the difficulties of breaking new ground on a dormant site.

Women farmers in the network also coached each other on how to work with the USDA office and programs. In fact, MIFFS has found that farmer-to-farmer education is the most effective strategy for sharing information and actually encouraging action!

The following are excerpts from two stories shared by women farmers in the network:

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**Story I.** Erin and Franklin (a multi-cultural couple) own a small, diversified operation that now sits on nine acres just outside of the city of Flint. Because their operation is not a regionally typical family farm, they encountered a number of unexpected difficulties.

For example, since Erin and Franklin are not married, Erin said, “In order to get the farm number - we had to sign affidavits that each of us could sign for the other one.” Even then, “Franklin would go start part of the process, and it turned out that I’d have to sign something too.” Erin and Franklin had to return to the USDA offices approximately 10 times between the two of them, just to obtain the farm number. In total, it took months to complete the process. “We didn’t know what the paperwork would be like.” Erin said, “We didn’t know what to ask for.”

Erin and Franklin are both savvy people; they are well-educated entrepreneurs who have had to navigate difficult systems in other areas of their work and lives, but Erin says, “What would have been helpful is a list of things I needed to do in order to get the number. I didn’t have that, so I had no way to advocate for myself. Eventually, their farm was registered and Erin and Franklin decided to pursue both USDA programs as well as some community-based opportunities to build the infrastructure and capacity of their farm. They began the process of working with NRCS to apply for an Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) grant to purchase a high tunnel.

Erin says she understands why the process was so difficult, “Genesee county farms are mostly larger, commodity crop farms. We have also had our District Conservationist switch four times in the past few years, so it makes it hard for them to learn more about the smaller, alternative types of farming practices.”

Erin offered the following advice when she spoke with WIA producers about her experience:

Give yourself plenty of time. There are time-limited sign ups. It is important to establish your relationship with NRCS. Get your farm number, DUNS number, and a conservation plan in place so that you don’t have to wait so long when you want to apply for a USDA program. Ask questions: How will I be scored? What process are they using to evaluate my farm? Find out what you need to bring before you go.

**Story II.** A mother-daughter farming team (and WIA Network participants) also worked extensively with NRCS on their Sesquicentennial farm (started in 1831). Over time, they have adapted to changes in demand for local food, the need for off-farm income, the cost of production, and encroaching development. Working with USDA, they have put in cover crops and installed a long fence with the help of conservation funding through the NRCS.

Through challenging weather and family illnesses, they were able to continue making progress on items they have put in their conservation plan. They too shared their stories with the WIA Network and encouraged everyone to begin forming relationships with the USDA staff. The mother-daughter team’s bottom line, “They really worked with us; they understood.”

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WIA Network Participants planting sorghum sudan grass cover crop and smoothing out the dirt over the hand-sown seed.



Admiring their work at the WIA Farm Development Center, Genesys Health Park, just south of Flint, Michigan.

Excerpts in this piece are adapted from a story written by Lindsey J. Scalera, [lindsey@linsight.net](mailto:lindsey@linsight.net), on behalf of [MIFFS](#) and the [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#)