

Idaho Women in Agriculture gather to learn and network at statewide conferences

AT A GLANCE

Idaho women from all fields of agriculture have gathered together the past two years to strengthen ties, share and learn from each other and promote a future for Idaho Agriculture.

The Situation

Idaho women contribute greatly to the success of agriculture in our state. Where once agriculture was dominated by men, it is now commonplace to see women producers, fieldsmen, scientists and program directors. The number of women engaged in agriculture has increased significantly in the past 15 years, both nationally and in Idaho. Women as principal operators on Idaho farms increased by 33% (from 2,245 in 1997, to 2,995 in 2012). Women in agriculture do not always have the opportunity to attend agricultural conferences that are targeted at their needs as part of the farming operation. Women need be recognized as a valuable contributors to Idaho agriculture.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension joined the Idaho Barley Commission to co-host the first ever Idaho Women in Agriculture conference in Twin Falls in February 2013. Both the planning and the sponsorships for the conference were collaborative efforts of multiple Idaho organizations, agencies, commodity groups and farmers. The conference was advertised broadly through numerous agency email lists, the press and radio. After much positive feedback from the first conference, we held a second one in Nampa in 2014.

A total of 75 participants attended the conference in 2013. The first conference focused on the accomplishments of Idaho women in agriculture and featured



Women gather to learn and network at the 2014 Idaho Women in Agriculture conference in Nampa, Idaho.

three prominent Idaho women: Senator Maxine Bell; Idaho Department of Agriculture Director Celia Gould and UI Extension Director Charlotte Eberlein. Their presentations were rated highly and several participants commented that they were inspiring.

The 2014 conference was attended by approximately 60 women and the day led off an inspiring and humorous keynote presentation by Susie Oberdahlhoff from Iowa. Susie's real live stories as a city girl who became a farmer's wife were followed by presentations from a diverse panel of Idaho women producers. The stories that the producers shared about their farming operations, both the challenges and their successes, inspired attendees and were a big hit.

Both conferences were planned to balance morning inspirational talks with afternoon educational sessions. Topics covered were of broad interest to women producers and support professionals.

Topics in 2013 included: new market trends; agritourism and culinary events; and creative financing. An unexpected highlight for those staying until the end of the day was an impromptu visit from Governor Otter, Senator Risch and Lieutenant Governor Brad Little (who just happened to be in Twin Falls that day). Participants enjoyed hearing the political support of agriculture and recognition of the growing role of women in agriculture in our state.

Afternoon sessions in 2014 covered Policy Issues (Food Safety Modernization Act, the new Farm Bill, and Land Use Planning) and Skill Building (Record Keeping, Credit Scores and Identity Theft). While attendees at the 2014 event were not dazzled by the state politicians, they did have a delicious lunch and cooking demonstration that turned out to be one of the day's highlights. Chef Brenda Thompson, author of a *Chef-Designed School Lunch*, provided an excellent lunch and a short cooking demonstration based on her easy, healthy and "reimbursable" qualified school lunch menu.



Chef Brenda Thompson gives a cooking demonstration.

Program Outcomes

Both conferences were deemed a success with many positive comments and appreciation for hosting such an event. The goals were to inspire women in agriculture, teach them new skills to help them in their professions and to provide time for them to network with new friends and colleagues. The post conference evaluations indicated we met our goals.

In 2013, 95% of conference attendees responded that they gained knowledge about the roles and importance of women in agriculture. New market trends and agri-tourism both rated very high as take-home messages. Attendees also noted that a significant highlight of the conference was having the opportunity to network and meet other women farmers.

In 2014, the majority of women rated the conference as excellent and 81% felt the conference met their expectations. Ninety percent of participants rated the chef demonstration as excellent. Eighty-one percent indicated they would take

action or implement something they had learned about at this conference.

The Future

Conference planners for Idaho Women in Agriculture worked with Washington's conference team in 2014 and two Idaho sites (Sandpoint and Idaho Falls) were able to join the Washington Women in Agriculture event. Each site was linked by webinar to a plenary keynote speaker followed by local workshops around a central theme and planned agenda. That partnership worked so well that Idaho planners decided to join Washington in their 2015 conference by hosting 3-5 Idaho sites (and not holding a separate Idaho event). While this doesn't get all of the Idaho women together at one site, it makes it easier for travel and develops closer networking amongst women at the local sites. We look forward to more learning and networking among regional groups of Idaho women in agriculture.

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