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**'THIS DISC IS NOT FOR A BIRD BATH. IT'S FOR MY TRACTOR':  
EXPLORING GENDER, SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, AND NETWORKS IN  
WESTERN MONTANA**

**By**

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**Bachelor of Arts, The University of the South, Sewanee, TN, 2006**

**Professional Paper**

**Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of**

**Master of Science  
in Environmental Studies - Sustainable Food & Farming**

**The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT**

**May 2014**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project could not have happened without the energy, thoughtfulness, generosity, and voices of the following people, for whom I am deeply grateful:

Neva Hassanein, for reaching out to me and bringing me to Missoula. Many thanks for your guidance and support throughout this project and my tenure as your advisee. Thank you for asking tough questions, waiting until the end to really tell me you think I am a good writer, and for bringing people and activities to EVST that fall outside the realm of “traditional academia.”

Laurie Yung and Jill Belsky, thank you for agreeing to be on my committee and for pushing me to make this document the best it can be. I am so grateful for your time and thoughts.

Many thanks to the women farmers whose voices constitute this research and whose company I have enjoyed tremendously! You inspire me with your work, values, and thoughtful consideration of your roles in the sustainable agriculture movement.

Many thanks to Bryan Von Lossberg and the Alternative Energy Resources Organization for allowing me to take my personal interests and translate them into potentially useful research. Thank you for supporting this project financially and for supporting the idea of a women farmer network.

Melissa Matthewson at Oregon State University Extension, many thanks for your organization’s financial support and for your work with farmers and women farmer networks.

The Dawson Memorial Fund provided financial support for this research, which was tremendously helpful.

## **ABSTRACT**

Rocke, Eva, M.S. Environmental Studies, May 2014

'This Disc is not for a Bird Bath. It's for my Tractor': Exploring Gender, Sustainable Agriculture, and Networks in western Montana

Committee Chair: Neva Hassanein

Women's presence in agriculture as farmers, consumers, advocates, and activists has become ever more apparent over the last two decades as census data, popular media, and academic literature increasingly reflect their work. Many of the farmers in western Montana practicing sustainable agriculture are women and have built relationships with other women farmers in the region through existing agriculture-focused organizations like Homegrown and the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative. Even with the strong presence of these organizations, some women farmers feel there is potential for the formalization of a women farmer network in western Montana that would increase the opportunities for socialization among farmers and provide space to discuss gender-specific experiences of farming. This project describes interviewees' experiences as women in agriculture, existing communication among women farmers, and explores the potential for a women farmer network in western Montana.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Montana's diverse and scenic landscapes are home to a variety of agriculture; commodity agriculture that produce wheat and alfalfa as well as small-scale diversified agriculture intended to serve a regional market with fresh, oftentimes certified organic, food. Organizations such as the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO), the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative, the Community Food & Agriculture Coalition, and the Montana Sustainable Growers' Union (Homegrown) have arisen in response to and as a result of the presence of a thriving community of small-scale agriculturalists in western Montana.

In 2011, Oregon State University (OSU) Extension reached out to AERO in an effort to engage Montana farmers and food-related nonprofits in exploring a possible women farmers' network in Montana. OSU received federal funding to support farmer networks and committed a portion of the funds to supporting the development of farmer networks in neighboring states. This paper describes the research and organizing conducted in spring 2012 and fall 2013 to explore interest among women farmers practicing small-scale alternative agriculture in western Montana in a women farmer network. In addition to compiling academic and practitioner-oriented literature on women farmers, farmer networks, and gender in the sustainable agriculture movement, this paper describes the experiences of 18 women farmers who were interviewed for this research and their thoughts on the development of a potential network. Concluding comments address the women farmer retreat held in February 2014 that brought many of these research participants and other women farmers together to discuss farming and a network.

Over the last 15 years, an increasing number of scholars and practitioners have examined the intersection of gender and agriculture, including the role gender plays in the experiences and motivations of farmers practicing small-scale alternative agriculture. Academic research has explored women farmer networks (Hassanein 1997, 1999), the motivations of women to participate in sustainable agriculture and community supported agriculture (CSA) (Trauger 2004), and the effectiveness of the sustainable agriculture movement in addressing gender disparities and inequality (Allen and Sachs 1992). The development of women farmer networks across the country reflects the changing face of agriculture in the U.S. and the unique needs of those producing our food. Women farmer networks are a result of the increasing presence of women in agriculture, an increased need among women to learn what have been considered "male" farm skills, and the desire of women farmers to learn from and support each other as they pursue what has been considered a "male" livelihood.

To identify interest among women farmers practicing small-scale agriculture in western Montana in a women's network, 18 women were purposively selected and interviewed. Interview questions prompted reflections on how gender has (or has not) affected participants' experiences as farmers, existing communication among women farmers in western Montana, the potential resources and opportunities a farmer network might offer to members, and the potential structure and scheduling of farmer network activities.

Research findings indicate that many participants are rewarded by the challenging and dynamic nature of farming. Participants also note their appreciation for outdoor work, the hands-on, physical nature of farming, and the opportunity to work with plants and be intimately connected to the seasons. Over a third of the interviewees describe a connection between farming and their desire to live a particular set of values, one rooted in self-sufficiency, environmental stewardship, and community. In identifying the major challenges of farming, women farmers describe how their work can be isolating, overwhelming during the peak growing season, and requires a diverse skill set that also contributes to their feelings of satisfaction about farming.

Participants were also asked to describe their experiences as women farmers and the ways in which their gender has impacted their pursuit of farming as a livelihood. Literature on women farmer networks indicates that some network participants feel supported and affirmed in their identities as farmers through their involvement in these networks. Additionally, many networks provide hands-on skills training that women farmers may have not been given in their apprenticeship or internship experiences. Consistent with other research findings, some participants in this study describe a need for on-farm technical training (tractoring, carpentry, mechanical training) and expressed an interest in women-only space for its supportive potential and for its capacity to provide women farmers with more farmer-to-farmer social time. Not all participants indicated a need for training in traditionally “male” farm skills, though all participants agreed that more opportunities for farmers to socialize and network would be welcome.

In addition to 18 in-depth interviews, this project also involved the organizing and facilitation of a 2-day women farmer retreat in Hot Springs, Montana. The retreat was intended to provide a social networking opportunity for women farmers in the region, to share some of the findings of the in-depth interviews, and to more fully discuss and explore the potential for a formalized women farmer network in the region. Thirteen women participated in the retreat, which involved shared meals, presentations from agriculture professionals, and plenty of networking time. At the conclusion of the retreat, participants expressed appreciation for the time to network, meet new women farmers from outside their immediate social networks, discuss technical on-farm issues and business strategies, and relax.

Many women farmers in western Montana are already somewhat connected to each other through their involvement in the growers’ co-op, the farmers’ union, and through their experiences working for each other in mentor/mentee contexts. All of the women interviewed for this research feel there is a need for more farmer-to-farmer networking opportunities in western Montana, though they also note the time-consuming nature of their work and their geographical distance from each other. Both of these factors make consistent and organized networking challenging. Ultimately, this project identifies interest among 18 women farmers in western Montana in establishing a more structured network that provides technical and social opportunities for women farmers. It also identifies several shared experiences and reflections on how gender impacts farmer experiences. The extent to which a more formalized or structured women farmer network develops in western Montana will ultimately depend on the leadership and enthusiasm of women farmers in the region.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Characterized by lakes, mountain ranges, windblown plains, and fertile valleys, Montana's topography provides the setting for diverse forms of natural resource management and their associated livelihoods, including forest stewardship, recreation management, and abundant agriculture. The eastern half of the state is distinct from the topography of the west. In the open plains found east of the Continental Divide, farmers commonly produce commodity crops like wheat, alfalfa, or chickpeas and manage large herds of cattle. Conventional commodity agriculture certainly exists in western Montana as well, but there is also abundant small-scale, alternative agriculture to be found. At first glance, it would seem that women are the ones doing much of the small-scale, diversified farming that characterizes sustainable agriculture in western Montana.

On a national scale, women's participation in agriculture and in the sustainable agriculture movement has become increasingly visible over the last 15 years. Books like *Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat* by Temra Costa, articles like those seen in *Women's News* discussing the "grass ceiling<sup>1</sup>," and the emergence of a multitude of women farmer networks around the country seem to suggest women's growing presence in the sustainable agriculture movement. At minimum, these publications and organizations illustrate greater attention to women's roles and involvement in food systems. This increased attention would also seem to indicate that women are farming more and are occupying a greater number of leadership roles within the movement. Identifying whether a greater number of women over the last 20 years have begun farming is a little more

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<sup>1</sup> Hladick, September 2012. <http://womensnews.org/story/entrepreneurship/120919/grass-ceiling-overhangs-surge-in-female-farmers#.UzRqmlXNnKc>

complicated. Just looking at the numbers, Census of Agriculture data seem to suggest that women's participation in agriculture has grown considerably over the last two decades. Recent data released by the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (USDA ERS 2013) indicate that the number of women-operated farms more than doubled in the period from 1982 to 2007, with the number of female operators jumping by 30% from 2002 to 2007. However, data from the 2012 census (only partially released in February 2014) indicate that the number of female principal operators has held steady between 2007 and 2012 at 14% of the total number of principal farm operators. Important to keep in mind is that until 1978, data on the gender of farm operators were not collected and until 2002, farms could not identify multiple principal farm operators. Allowing farmers to identify the gender of two or more principal operators when completing the survey could dramatically increase the representation of women in national agricultural statistics.

More clearly articulated in census data is that women tend to operate farms and ranches differently than do men. Women tend, on average, to operate smaller farms (average 40 acres compared to 149), to farm marginal land, and are less likely to be the primary operators of farms that produce major commodities (ERS 2013; Trauger 2001). According to 2012 agricultural census data, 90% of the women who identified as principal farm operators are managing farms that make less than \$50,000 annually, farm income and federal subsidies combined<sup>2</sup>. To put this into context, the 2012 census reflects that 75% of the farms in the United States are "small," meaning that they generate sales and receive federal subsidies for a total of \$50,000 or less per farm per year. In Montana, 2007

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Preliminary\\_Report/Highlights.pdf](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Preliminary_Report/Highlights.pdf)

census data indicate that the average farm size for women principal operators was 843 acres compared to the state-wide average farm size of 2,079 acres. Of the total number of women principal operators surveyed in the 2007 census, 2,348 (51%) of them make less than \$1,000 annually from on-farm income and 631 (14%) earn between \$10,000 and \$49,999 in on-farm income.<sup>3</sup> Across the state, 4,586 women identified as principal farm operators (out of a total of 29,524), with the average age being 60 years old.

Given the inability of the national agricultural census to generate comprehensive data on farm principal operators until 2002, what can be reasonably ascertained from trends about women farmers in the United States? It seems clear that between 2002 and 2007, the number of women identifying as principal operators increased dramatically and that their presence as a percentage of the total number of farm operators has remained consistent for the last five years. Also apparent is that as the total number of farms in the U.S. has decreased, men and women principal operators seem to have decreased at about the same rate. According to Leigh Adcock, executive director of the Iowa-based Women, Food, and Agriculture Network, women tend to farm on a smaller scale and are more likely to produce food for direct sales, making them more visible to consumers and their communities than they might be if producing only alfalfa or other commodity crops<sup>4</sup>. This characteristic is certainly true of western Montana, where there are many women farming on a small scale using alternative growing practices and marketing regionally.

Anecdotally, based on my time in communities in northern California and western Montana over the last eight years, women farmers certainly seem to be present at farmers'

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/Ag\\_Overview/AgOverview\\_MT.pdf](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Ag_Overview/AgOverview_MT.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://civileats.com/2014/02/20/farmers-aging-big-ag-getting-bigger-behind-the-preliminary-2012-ag-census-numbers>

markets and in local sustainable agriculture communities around the west. Whether there are, in fact, more women farming now than 20 years ago or whether awareness of women's involvement in agriculture has grown, the presence of women in the western Montana sustainable agriculture community is undeniable. For the last three years, the Montana Farmers' Union has facilitated a women farmer-specific conference. Similarly, the Montana Organic Association scheduled women farmer-specific panels during their 2013 annual meeting. On a national level, as I detail in a later chapter, women farmer-specific resources are becoming increasingly common and take the form of networks, women-specific conferences, women-specific workshops, and professional organizations. As reflected in academic literature on farmer networks and on networks' websites, women farmers have expressed frustration with not being taken seriously in their profession, having limited access to agricultural education opportunities, and with feeling pressured to embrace gendered on-farm roles. Women's networks have provided space for women to support each other and affirm women's roles in agriculture, as well as critical educational resources that some women have struggled to find. Women farmers in western Montana have expressed an interest in establishing a network for similar reasons and have already begun to discuss potential network activities, network scope, and member recruitment.

### **Research Question & Objectives**

The research question that inspired this research project initially was "What motivates women farmers in western Montana to participate in sustainable agriculture?" Once it became clear that there is interest in a women farmer network in the region, an additional research question was added in order to determine the depth and specific

interest in a farmer network among women I had already interviewed in spring 2012. This professional paper examines the potential for a women's agricultural network, or women farmer network, in western Montana, building upon research I conducted in the spring of 2012 that explored how gender has influenced the experiences of local women farmers and their motivations for farming using sustainable agriculture techniques. By describing and analyzing farmers' experiences, including challenges and their thoughts about the work they do, this paper explores how a farmer network might address some of the concerns and needs of women farmers in our region. Additionally, this project supports the mission and recent activities of the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) to develop a women farmer network in Montana in collaboration with Oregon State University (OSU) Extension.

### **Project Partners & Getting Started**

Since 2007, OSU's Small Farms Program has helped coordinate women farmer networks in Oregon. This began with the organization of the League of Women Farmers (LOWF), a women farmer network that, as of 2013, had 52 members in four counties in southwestern Oregon. According to OSU's toolkit for developing farmer networks, networks are "a way for farmers to exchange information, socialize, learn, and connect with peers" (Matthewson et al. 2013). The structure and function of most farmer networks is determined by farmer members, rather than extension staff, who sometimes serve as facilitators or coordinators during a network's initial development. Workshops, activities, leadership structure, and the purpose of a network are informed and determined by members with the intention of responding directly to farmers' needs and experiences.

*Women* farmer networks, more specifically, have been shown to support and create mentoring relationships among women farmers, build confidence and a sense of identity among women farmers, increase participants' exposure to marketing and technical information, and build new relationships that can improve business development and sales for small farms<sup>5</sup>. These assertions are further supported by academic literature that explores knowledge exchange and gender in the sustainable agriculture movement in the context of farmer networks (Hassanein 1999).

Currently, OSU coordinates three networks, all of which have seen high rates of participation and attendance. This success inspired OSU in 2011 to reach out to the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO), a Montana-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting sustainable communities, to gauge interest in starting a women farmer network in Montana. The first year of partnership was characterized mostly by information sharing, but spring 2013 brought about the first organized women farmer network meeting in western Montana. In April 2013, 15 women farmers attended an informal information session facilitated by OSU and AERO staff in Missoula as part of OSU's outreach to neighboring states interested in farmer networks. I attended this meeting, as well as the previous year's AERO Annual Meeting in October 2012 during which I spoke with a number of women farmers interested in starting a network. Several women farmer members of AERO, including a woman who was serving on the Board of Directors at the time, were interested in facilitating a breakout session to discuss the possibility of a network. After attending both meetings and having several additional conversations with farmers in the region, I expressed an interest to AERO and OSU in

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<sup>5</sup> <http://smallfarms.oregonstate.edu/womens-farmer-networks/main>

doing additional research into women farmer networks and local women's interest in establishing a network. AERO and OSU agreed to provide modest financial support for my research and for a retreat, which I facilitated, in winter 2014 for women farmers.

Accordingly, this project's outcomes include: an investigation of women farmers' interest in a network in western Montana; identifying potential goals of the network; the facilitation of an initial retreat; and a proposed potential structure and activities for the network into the future.

A number of the women I interviewed in spring 2012 and have met through subsequent AERO meetings are very interested in seeing a women farmer network develop in western Montana. Aside from interest among women farmers in western Montana, qualitative research that explores women in the sustainable agriculture movement and farmer networks contributes to a body of academic and popular literature on these subjects that began to emerge in the 1980's. This project makes a practical, tangible contribution to our regional sustainable agriculture community as well as to academic and popular discourse on women's involvement in sustainable agriculture. To better place this project within the context of existing research on gender and agriculture and women farmer networks, I review below the academic literature on these topics and describe the role and function of women farmer networks that have been studied in other regions of the country. Before describing participants' experiences and reflections on a farmer network, chapter two explains my choice to use qualitative research methods, particularly the value of using in-depth interviews to explore farmer experiences, the strengths and limitations of this research, and paints a demographic picture of

participants and overviews of their farms. Key research findings, including farmers' reflections as women practicing agriculture, the rewards and challenges of farming as livelihood, participants' thoughts on developing further a network, and the potential benefits of a women's network constitute chapters three and four. Chapter five connects research to practice and describes the women farmer retreat planning and implementation processes that I undertook and which culminated in a retreat in February 2014. This paper concludes by offering my personal reflections on the retreat, farmers' reflections on the retreat, and potential opportunities for a women farmer network in western Montana to develop in the future.

## **Women in the Fields: Research on Gender and Women Farmer Networks**

### ***Gender in Sustainable Agriculture***

Over the last three decades, an increasing number of scholars have described and analyzed women's roles in agriculture, exploring both conventional and alternative forms. One goal of this research, particularly in studying women's involvement in agriculture in non-industrialized countries, has been to increase the visibility of women farmers in order to make agricultural education and extension more relevant and effective. This scholarship has been an attempt to raise awareness of the participation of women in agriculture and today has resulted in the increased presence of women farmers in the media, more resources for women farmers (such as networks, state and federal funding for women farmers), and, potentially, a greater number of women farmers identifying as "primary operators" on census surveys.

An examination of gender is perhaps especially important in identifying what is meant by “sustainable” or “alternative” agriculture. Prior to the 1980’s, women’s voices in agriculture were few and far between. A shift occurred when scholars began to describe women’s involvement as farmers and farm workers in the 1980’s and deepened their exploration of women farmers by describing their roles in the sustainable agriculture movement. Allen and Sachs (1992) note that the vision and goals of the sustainable agriculture movement (SAM) have been articulated by a diverse collection of advocates and interest groups. What they found missing from this discourse at the time of their writing was “an attempt to improve food and agricultural systems for all people, regardless of class, race/ethnicity, or gender” (Allen and Sachs 1992: 33). They describe how the alternative agriculture depicted and promoted by writers such as Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and Marty Strange often give “implicit justification” to traditional gender roles, wherein “the family farm is heralded as the ideal organization, with little recognition or critique of the historically patriarchal character of family farms” (Allen and Sachs 1992: 32-33). This raises an important question: How ‘alternative’ is an agriculture that does not embrace an alternative social organization or the diverse voices of its participants? In other words, as long as gender, social class, and ethnicity remain largely absent from discourse on agriculture’s sustainability, how “sustainable” can it be?

Over the last 20 years, this largely white, male-centric depiction of agriculture has shifted. An array of scholarship explores women’s motivations for farming, women farmer networks, and how sustainable agriculture “empowers” women. Trauger (2004) found that women farmers in western Pennsylvania were drawn to sustainable agriculture precisely

because it offers women an alternative space within the world of agriculture. She explains that, while “productivist agricultural models marginalize women from spaces of knowledge, sustainable agriculture provides spaces of empowerment for women farmers” (2004: 290). Specifically, women farmers expressed feeling “out of place” in feed mills, equipment dealerships, hay auctions, sale barns, and farm shows (Trauger 2004: 299). These women cited alternative spaces in the sustainable agriculture community, such as organic feed mills, organic and sustainable agriculture organizations, market gardening associations, farmers’ markets, and marketing co-operatives in which they felt welcome and accepted. These findings reflect the potential for the sustainable agriculture movement and its actors to create spaces that legitimize and affirm women’s identities as farmers.

### ***Women Farmer Networks***

Women farmer networks are an example of farmer organizations intended to provide spaces that legitimize and affirm women’s identities as farmers, in addition to providing educational opportunities for their members. Hassanein (1997, 1999) discusses the structure, membership, and purposes of women farmer networks by drawing on participant observation data and in-depth interviews with members of a network in Wisconsin. Hassanein (1997) considers how the gendered experiences of women farmers within the network inform the type and nature of knowledge shared among members. She explains that both the type of knowledge and the way it is exchanged within the context of a farmer network is informed by farmers’ experience of their gender. For instance, a participant in her study describes how the women’s network provides a space that feels

respectful of the knowledge and experiences of women farmers, while other gatherings (like her husband's farmer meetings) feel less so to her (1997: 255). Another participant described having to circumvent a loan officer, who had refused to provide a loan to a woman, by getting her husband to submit the application in his name (1997: 255). Women farmers in Hassanein's study expressed the importance of a women-specific network because it offers them a place to share their experiences as women and as farmers, and to support each other in their work. Hassanein also found in some instances that members of the network "generated and shared an understanding of women's agricultural capacities" by being "role models for one another" (1999: 150). These findings indicate the potential for women's networks to empower their members by providing educational resources, a space for women farmers to share their experiences with each other, and act as mentors for other women farmers.

Surprisingly, aside from Hassanein's research, few detailed examinations of women farmer networks and their function can be found in the literature. Research by Barbercheck et al. (2009) and Trauger et al. (2010) examines the effectiveness of agricultural extension programs in reaching women farmers in Pennsylvania and serving the specific needs of women in their agricultural community. The studies conclude that some of the values and perceptions held by extension agents limit the applicability and accessibility of educational programs to women farmers. The authors acknowledge that, "in spite of the increased numbers of female farm operators in Pennsylvania and the USA, in general, they continue to be underserved by traditional models of agricultural education and technical training" (Trauger 2010: 86). The 2009 research described by Barbercheck et

al. was conducted as an activity of the Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network (PA-WAgN) founded in 2003. The study collects survey data from 151 beginning women farmers and explains that the problem most frequently reported as being "considerable or moderate was the sense that women producers are not taken as seriously as men producers" (2009: 6). The authors recommend the "creation of opportunities for women farmers to network with each other, extension personnel, and agricultural service providers," recognizing that "women farmers may face barriers such as discrimination by other farmers and agriculture service providers" (Barbercheck et al. 2009: 9). Based on their findings, Barbercheck and her co-authors note the different needs of women farmers compared to male farmers related to scheduling of workshops and learning styles and recommend a variety of adjustments to extension programming that does not seem to be specific to Pennsylvania farmers. The authors acknowledge that their research includes only women farmers in Pennsylvania, but all of the report's final recommendations could easily apply to agricultural extension in western Montana that is intended to be accessible to farmers of both genders.

Qualitative researchers have also explored the experiences of women farmers in leadership positions within more traditional agriculture organizations. Pini (2005) refers to women in agricultural leadership positions as "the third sex," signifying their need to simultaneously embrace traditional symbols of femininity in their work within farm organizations while also "being one of the guys" (2005:79). In her study, Pini describes how her participants feel they must "ride the gender bicycle," referring to their need to demonstrate competence in "masculine" behaviors, while constantly being reminded of

their feminine status. Common experiences shared by the women in this study include being offered an apology for a male colleague's lewdness, being asked to speak for "all women" in sharing their opinions or experiences, and generally being treated differently than male organizational leaders (Pini 2005:79). These studies and others describe the experiences of women farmers as they attempt to navigate what continues to be a predominantly male-centric professional and social world.

In response to a growing attention to women in agriculture, dozens of organizations have sprung up around the U.S. over the last few decades with the goal of supporting women farmers practicing both sustainable and conventional agriculture. The Pennsylvania Women's Agriculture Network (PA-WAgN) mentioned above provides farmer-guided trainings, seminars, conferences, a structured mentorship program, and online information sharing tools. The Women, Food, and Agriculture Network (WFAN), an organization based in Iowa, supports women farmers practicing sustainable agriculture techniques and offers resources on a national scale. The League of Women Farmers, the network in southwestern Oregon facilitated by OSU, provides training, social networking, and advice to women farmers in the region. North Carolina is home to the Women of the Land Agricultural Network (NCWOLAN), a group that provides "farm school" to women farmer members. These are just a few examples of what has become an increasingly popular demonstration of women's presence in agriculture and the growing support for women choosing to farm sustainably. Trauger (2009) notes that "the strength of WAgN is its emphasis on empowering women to be successful farmers and stakeholders in agriculture, regardless of the scope or scale of their operations" and that it "connects

isolated farmers to each other and functions as a support system and source of information and shared resources” (2009: 120). Networks have emerged as a response to a lack of women’s voices in agriculture and a need for clear affirmation that women are farming and playing leadership roles in the sustainable agriculture movement. Women in Montana are farming, are leaders in our regional sustainable agriculture movement, and in many cases are geographically isolated from other women farmers. Given the valuable role and function of women farmer networks elsewhere, why not explore how a network might serve women in western Montana?

## CHAPTER 2: PROJECT DESIGN & METHODS

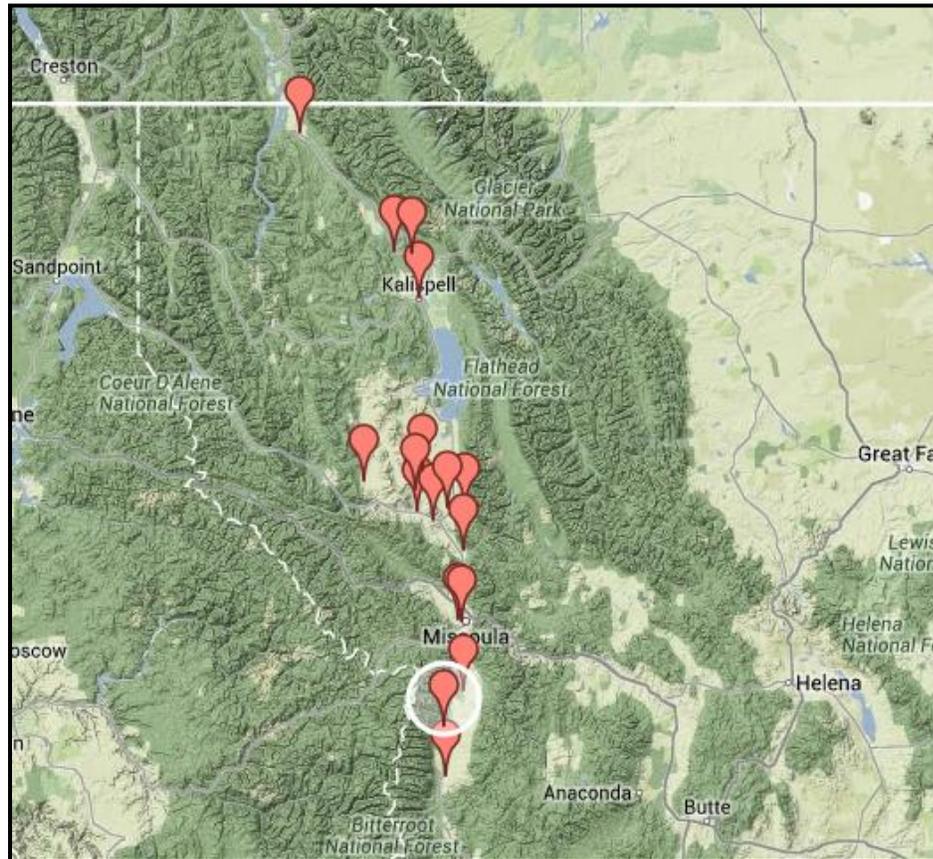
In western Montana, women maintain a strong presence as farmers and advocates in the sustainable agriculture movement. Some are single; some are partnered with men; some are married but farming solo; some are lesbians; and some are feminists. Some of these women have been growing food for the region and their local communities for over 30 years, while others are just beginning. Immediately apparent at the start of this project was the diversity that exists even among women farmers in western Montana. With the understanding that a western Montana women farmer network would need to serve diverse needs and a broad geographic region, I interviewed multiple generations of farmers, women from across the region, and from both veteran and beginning farmers. My research explores these women farmers' experiences, successes, and challenges, in addition to the degree of their interest in building a women farmer network. I describe their work, the role of gender in their farming experiences, and the importance they place on being models of an alternative agriculture within their communities and as part of a larger food system. In this chapter, I describe my project design, research methods, descriptions of participants, and research strengths and limitations. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the value of applied research, specifically with the value of applying data from in-depth interviews to the exploration of a women farmer network.

In spring 2012, I interviewed seven women farmers from the Missoula, Bitterroot, and Moiese Valleys in western Montana. These areas comprise much of western Montana's agricultural community and include women who have already attended some of the gatherings noted earlier and expressed interest in a network. A goal of the interviews

was to determine a more specific geographic scope of the network, specifically how far women are willing to travel for meetings and events so that network structure reflects an appropriate geographic area. The interview guide for these first seven interviews prompted reflections on their experiences related to gender in farming, the challenges and benefits of being a woman farmer, and their thoughts on feminism. The first interview guide, used for the spring 2012 interviews, did not ask explicitly for thoughts on a women farmer network or for the resource needs of women farmers in Montana. To build upon this data and meet the specific objectives of this project, I interviewed an additional 11 farmers. I was particularly interested in their responses to the same topics I asked about in the initial interviews plus their interest in forming a network. In total, I completed in-depth interviews with 18 women farmers; this involved re-visiting the seven farmers interviewed in spring 2012 to ask questions specifically regarding their interest in a farmer network. (See Figure 1 for geographic distribution of women farmers who were interviewed).

I selected the 11 women who were interviewed in spring 2012 based on their involvement in the Western Montana Growers' Co-op and the Montana Sustainable Growers Union, as well as the location of their farms in western Montana. Both organizations are comprised of farmers engaged in small-scale and/or sustainable farming techniques. Because of my own interest and those of AERO and OSU, we sought women to interview for this project who characterized their farming as "sustainable" and/or "alternative," including but not limited to farms that are certified organic. By limiting my sample of interviewees this way, I am honoring the intentions of the OSU small farm

program (that is, to support small-scale, sustainable agriculture), AERO's mission and programmatic specifically a community of women farmers practicing sustainable agriculture.



**Figure 1.** Locations of farms represented in this study across western Montana.

All 18 of the women I contacted for an interview agreed to be part of this research. In scheduling the interviews, I allocated 2 hours to each participant and the interviews ranged in length from 43 minutes to 1 hour and 48 minutes. All but two of the interviews were conducted on the participants' farms and most of the conversations included farm tours, leaving me with a deep appreciation for the diversity and intensity of farming around the region. To ensure that interviews were systematic and able to produce data that can be usefully compared, I developed and used an interview guide (Appendix A) with

key questions and probes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded using focused coding to identify key themes that emerged from the interviews and correspond to themes in existing literature (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011: 311). At the start of the interview process, participants were assigned a number determined by the order in which they were interviewed. This became the only identifier once analysis began. Quotations used in this paper are directly from transcripts and provided to illustrate themes and concepts that emerged from the interviews. Farmers' voices and thoughts are represented by the use of "Participant" and a number, as in "P1" following quotations.

I chose in-depth interviews as my central research method because I was seeking to gain a deeper understanding of specific topics from a specific group of individuals. I was seeking depth and detail in the responses, particularly regarding farmers' current relationships with other farmers, the frequency and type of communication among growers, and women farmers' reflections on the challenges and opportunities that exist for them as farmers. Interviews also allow for greater depth of data and for any topics or themes to arise that were not anticipated by the researcher but are important and meaningful to research participants. Additionally, Hesse-Biber and Leavy explain that in-depth interviews allow respondents to speak on two levels, from experience and from perception (2011: 98). In the context of this study, farmers reflected on their personal experiences as well as their perceptions of how gender is enacted in western society and how they are perceived by their communities and society at large as women practicing agriculture. The questions and probes in my interview guide were informed by existing research on women farmer networks, research on extension and educational resources for

women farmers, and AERO and OSU's interest in exploring the potential for a farmer network. The guide is organized into two main parts: questions pertaining to "network potential" and those that seek to reveal "farmer experiences" related to gender. It is my intention to accurately and thoroughly convey the thoughts and experiences of the women farmers who were generous enough to be part of this project.

### **Women Farmers in Western Montana**

The producers involved in this study farm on land ranging in size from 2 to 50 acres, farm sizes substantially smaller than the typical wheat producer farming in eastern Montana<sup>6</sup>. The Economic Research Service (ERS) of the US Department of Agriculture defines "small farms" as those producing Gross Cash Farm Income (GCFI) of less than \$250,000, rather than by acreage under production<sup>7</sup>. For the purposes of this study, I contacted women producers who are not selling commodity crops, as I was searching for producers serving a local or regional market in western Montana. From my early graduate studies and interest in the local foods movement, I became connected to two regional organizations working directly with small-scale producers, the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative (WMGC) and the Montana Sustainable Farmers' Union (also known as Homegrown). Through these two organizations I became familiar with producers in the area and was able to create an initial list of women farmers in the Flathead, Moiese, Jocko, Missoula, and Bitterroot Valleys that make up western Montana. This string of valleys, some with a backdrop of dramatic peaks and picturesque lakes, sets the physical

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<sup>6</sup> The average farm size in Montana is 2,056 acres according to a February 2013 press release from the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

<sup>7</sup> Hoppe, Robert, James MacDonald, and Penni Korb. 2010. Small Farms in the United States: Persistence Under Pressure. United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service: EIB 63.

stage for this applied qualitative research. By selecting growers who are already associated with organizations serving regional markets and are networked with other producers practicing alternative agriculture (WMGC and Homegrown), I was able to find women farmers who already had things in common (such as production practices and marketing strategies), were located relatively close to each other, and therefore might be more inclined to participate in a future regional women farmers' network. Study participants vary in age, with the youngest being 28 at the time of her first interview with me, and in number of years farming in order to most accurately reflect the diversity of women currently farming on a small scale in western Montana.

The voices represented in these pages are from women who are farming on a small scale (between 2 and 50 acres, approximately) and who are primarily producing mixed vegetables for local and regional markets. Several have diversified farms in which they also grow flowers for sale; a few produce small quantities of hay or other grains for sale or for their own animals; and several have livestock and chickens as part of their diversified farms. All but three of the women work exclusively on their farms and earn no off-farm income. Several of them have partners or husbands who work off farm and contribute income from off-farm employment. One participant works within a non-profit organization managing a farm that educates and trains at-risk youth while also producing food that is sold in local stores and through a farm stand managed by the teens in the program. Another farmer's business centers around her egg production rather than mixed vegetables, though she continues to produce small quantities of vegetables for the growers' co-op each year. Many of the farms highlighted in this research incorporate on-farm

education and community engagement into their operations as well, including farm camps during the summer months, community salsa-making events, on-farm dinners, and farm tours.

Community supported agriculture (CSAs) and membership in the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative are two common strategies for farmers in western Montana who choose to market and distribute their products regionally. Eleven of the women interviewed for this study are members of the WMGC, though some of them are located outside the region served by the co-op (the Flathead Valley, for instance) or choose to market their produce independently. Started by Montana farmers and regional food system advocates in 2003, the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative (WMGC) is an agricultural marketing cooperative located in Arlee, MT. WMGC "aggregates, processes, markets, and distributes products at a regional scale for its grower members" (Hassanein et. al. 2013: 6). The co-op serves a variety of local markets such as grocers, restaurants, and institutions and coordinates its own CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a model of direct sales wherein customers pay at the start of the season for a share of produce that they receive incrementally throughout the season. This allows customers to invest in farms that are producing for a local market while providing capital to the farmer for start-of-season expenses such as seed, fuel, equipment, etc. In addition to selling their products through the WMGC and facilitating their own CSAs, women farmers in western Montana are marketing foods through area farmers' markets, direct marketing to restaurants, schools,

and grocers and through on-farm produce stands. Appendix B identifies the marketing strategies employed by each participant.

Many of the women practicing alternative agriculture in western Montana are college-educated entrepreneurs with a social conscience, a fact made explicit by the women I interviewed for this research. All 18 participants in this research graduated from four-year colleges or universities and four of them have earned graduate degrees. Only 3 of the 18 come from farming families or had a background in food production prior to experiencing their first agricultural apprenticeships as young adults. Their motivations for being involved in farming will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, but with the exception of one farmer, all of these women have chosen to make agriculture their full-time profession without having any known or recent family history in farming. One woman's assertion captures a common sentiment among the women I interviewed: "Part of what appeals to me in farming is that it's almost an activist role...I'm finding a lot of satisfaction in doing this and thinking about how we can be the *real* alternative to GMO food and all that." Being women farmers practicing alternative agriculture in Montana is about more than just making a living.

Another common thread among these farmers is their farm training experiences followed by, for many of them, working with and for each other. Five of the women interviewed have been farming in Montana for over 15 years and have served as mentors and teachers to many of the younger farmers in this study. On-farm apprenticeships and participation in the University of Montana's PEAS program were frequently cited by the women as important pieces of their agricultural education. Five women had participated

in the PEAS program as University of Montana students, while four women studied sustainable or ecological agriculture while earning their undergraduate degrees elsewhere. With only one exception, the women I interviewed make up a multigenerational web of mentors and mentees that stretches across western Montana. Some have received more “formal” agriculture education than others, but the interconnectedness of these women through their mentor/student relationships is undeniable. This existing social network of women farmers revolves primarily around educating the next generation of farmers and established mentor/mentee relationships. Its existence indicates a desire among women farmers to support and learn from each other, a key function of the organized farmer networks mentioned earlier and those reflected in the academic literature. In addition to the 18 farmers I interviewed however, there are currently women farmers in western Montana who have indicated an interest in a women farmer network who have not worked on the PEAS farm or for other women farmers in the region. The interest of these women in participating in a farmer network and feeling included in a network that includes many women farmers already familiar with each other was made clear during our February retreat. Several of the women in attendance were women I had never met and who were not part of the mentor/mentee web I have just described, indicating the ability of a network to potentially reach more women than just those already familiar with each other and in close relationship. Research participants also frequently noted their appreciation for women farmer mentors who do not reside in Montana, who are no longer alive, and who offered leadership to them through their apprenticeship experiences elsewhere. The agroecology program at the University of

California Santa Cruz, for example, was one valuable educational experience cited by two interviewees who had completed the program.

### **Strengths & Limitations of the Study**

The strengths and limitations of this research stem from the use of qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews. As noted earlier, interviewing women farmers has allowed me to hear their detailed reflections on their experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the work they do. However, this type of qualitative research does not allow for generalizations to be made; rather, it is context-specific and attempts to articulate the experiences of and relationships between women farmers practicing a specific type of agriculture in a specific geographic location. The findings of this research speak to the potential for a women farmer network focused on sustainable agriculture in western Montana, but cannot be used to make assumptions about the needs, desires, or experiences of women farmers elsewhere. Similarly, I make no attempt to establish causal relationships with this research, but focus instead on describing relationships and experiences that have been shared with me by the participants.

A strength of this research is that it does not name the participants and the confidentiality of everything shared in my communications with the farmers was prioritized. Several women noted that this was important to them because of their desire to describe experiences with other farmers in the region, particularly experiences related to internships and learning from farmer colleagues with whom they continue to have working relationships. In other cases, farmers noted tension that exists between growers within the growers' cooperative and among farmers with differing opinions on organic certification. Additionally, a few women were blunt about their lack of desire for a network

but nervous that their responses would upset women who do want to see a network formalize.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this research is that it has made an effort to listen to women's voices and describe their experiences with the intention of exploring the potential for a supportive, responsive, and intentional community of farmers. Prior to beginning the second set of interviews, I made it clear to AERO and OSU that the women farmers I was interviewing may not be interested in a network and that the interviews and winter retreat would provide data indicating whether a formalized farmer network is necessary and useful. Upon completing all 18 interviews and hearing from women farmers that a farmer network could serve several purposes, I proceeded with retreat planning knowing that it would provide another opportunity to hear farmers' thoughts on a more structured women farmer network. Harding and Norberg (2005: 2011) write that feminist scholars have "insisted on the adoption of research principles and practices that are both intellectually alert to and sensitive about what disadvantaged groups want to know." The voices presented in this research, both in the literature review and in the original data, are primarily from *women* farmers. This project combines the process of qualitative data collection (listening) with response (actively planning and facilitating a network retreat, because it was of interest to the farmers, and discussing the potential for a network). In the spirit of feminist methodology, I have tried to be true to the reflections of the women I interviewed and respond to their needs by providing a useful resource. The choice to conduct in-depth interviews and to select participants based on the geographic and

experiential diversity of women farmers around western Montana speaks to my intention to make this research and any potential outcomes useful to the women involved.

By selecting a relatively small group of women to interview and by limiting participation to women who self-identify as practitioners of sustainable agriculture, this study is limited in its ability to reflect the experiences of a greater number of women farmers. In an effort to hear from women within a reasonable geographic distance from each other, this study excludes women in central and eastern Montana and women practicing conventional agriculture, many of whom may find a women farmer network valuable. By asking participants to reflect on the potential usefulness of a women farmer network before actually experiencing the farmer retreat, farmer perceptions of a potential network are somewhat theoretical and might have differed substantially if asked the same questions immediately after the retreat. In other words, farmer perceptions of a network's value were collected before many of the farmers had an opportunity to experience a women-only farmer space.

A second limitation arises from the timeline within which this research was conducted. Ideally, all 18 interviews would have been conducted within six months of each other using only one interview guide. However, since this research and final project emerged out of an earlier, smaller set of interviews that took a much broader focus, farmers interviewed in spring 2012 had already been asked questions related to gender, gendered roles on their farms, and feminism. It is possible that these women, because of our earlier conversations, responded to the follow-up interview questions differently than they would have had only one interview been conducted.

With a greater understanding of the research participants, their farms, and their connections with each other, we now turn to the interviews and how this interview data indicate the potential usefulness of a women farmer network.

### CHAPTER 3: CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN FARMERS

Although this project focuses on assessing the need and potential for a women farmer network in western Montana, the questions that originally motivated me to begin these conversations are, “Why do there seem to be so many *women* practicing sustainable agriculture in western Montana? Why are they choosing to be farmers?” In general, I was interested in learning more about women’s experiences farming, particularly their motivations for pursuing such physically and energetically demanding work. A major role of farmer networks can be the resource they provide to women by giving them a space to voice their experiences and offer each other support. Asking women to articulate their experiences as farmers, paying particular attention to how their gender has affected their experiences, uncovered many shared themes, common challenges, and clear benefits and rewards to farming as women. Asking women to describe their experiences, the major benefits and challenges of farming, and how their gender has played a role in their choice to farm ultimately suggests how a women’s network might act as a supportive community and educational resource. This chapter begins by sharing these farmers’ descriptions of the rewards and challenges of farming, as well as their reflections on how their gender has impacted their experiences practicing sustainable agriculture. Included in this chapter are women’s descriptions of how farming, because of its challenging and dynamic nature, can be an empowering livelihood. Conversely, some women reflect on experiences where they have felt disempowered when asked to embrace gendered roles on farms and were not given equal access to information or opportunities because of their gender. Throughout this chapter, the voices of women farmers in western Montana share several parallel

messages as those presented in academic literature that explores gender in the sustainable agriculture movement.

### **The Challenge is the Reward**

Finding “meaningful” work, work that allows you to look back on a long day of effort and feel pride and a sense of satisfaction at what you have accomplished, is no easy feat. When cultural messages reinforce the idea that the value of one’s work equates to the size of your paycheck, people are forced to accept work that has little meaning but pays the bills. A demanding and sometimes less-than-lucrative livelihood like farming may not be the first profession to come to mind when considering jobs that are intellectually or emotionally fulfilling. But aside from being physically intense and sometimes full of routine, repetitious tasks, the women I interviewed assert that farming is *real*. Farming produces food that feeds families, neighbors, and communities, not to mention the individuals growing the food! This fact, for many of the women I interviewed, makes it some of the most rewarding work they have ever done.

As noted earlier, the majority of the women who participated in this research do not have any recent family history in farming. Many of these women farmers found farming only after pursuing other career paths and have had to seek out farm-specific education upon making a shift to farming as livelihood. Before she decided to farm, one farmer in this study worked in Boston for an investment firm. She had graduated from a well-known four-year college in New England and had sought a job that would allow her to make a living, repay student loans, and perform work that her degree had trained her to do. “I realized that I wasn’t spending my days in a way that I felt good about,” she explained. “I

don't think that I shared the values of the people around me, so that led me to the idea that I wanted to do something else, but I didn't know what that was" (P2). Her story resembles those of several of the women I interviewed: four years of college, followed by job hunting, followed by finding a job that pays the bills, but is perhaps not particularly fulfilling. In contrast, woman after woman explained in interviews that, for them, farming is real; it produces a tangible result, and, for most, puts a set of values and ethics into practice in a way that can be quantified and seen. One farmer shared that she feels farming "is a very honest way of making a living...What we offer to people is a necessity and it's a simple change we can all make in our lives, eating better to help the greater good, basically. I find it fulfilling in that way" (P4). Other major benefits of farming as a vocation include participants' love of food, food processing and preserving, and their general appreciation of plants. One woman who runs a CSA with her partner explains, "I just love plants! And I love preserving the food...It's very satisfying to be able to provide for yourself, not just during the growing season, but during the winter also" (P5). For another farmer who incorporates egg-laying hens, horses, and other animals into her farm scene, the connection with her animals is a significant reward (P7). In addition to feeling pride and satisfaction at producing wholesome food for their communities, six women describe the fulfillment they experience by exposing their children to agriculture. Not only do they see farming as an opportunity to share a meaningful livelihood with their families, they also acknowledge that getting to feed their families in such a personal way is a privilege and that it reinforces the value of food production and associated roles within the home.

| Rewards of Farming  | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| The “idea” of farming; “real,” meaningful work with a tangible result; farming as a self-sufficient lifestyle that also produces income; allows me to live the way I want to live | 15        |
| Physical work (getting hands dirty, using my body, being outside, etc.)   | 9         |
| Working with food & plants, connections to the seasons  | 6         |
| Farmer community & relationships with other growers; opportunity to “grow farmers” and watch interns grow and learn   | 6         |
| Feelings of accomplishment, efficiency; the challenge of having so much to do; constant problem solving; sense of productivity  | 6         |
| Sharing lifestyle & livelihood with children and family   | 6         |
| Direct contact with consumers and the community you serve   | 4         |
| Self employment, “being your own boss!”   | 3         |
| The endless opportunities for creativity, trying new things, and exploring new opportunities to expand your business  | 2         |

**Table 1. Women farmers’ reflections on the most rewarding components of farming. Participants were encouraged to offer as many rewards as appropriate. N=18.**

A second theme to emerge was that farming on a small scale and direct marketing to consumers provide a connection to consumers and, in some cases, come with a seasonal on-farm community of volunteers and interns that interviewees find highly rewarding. Four women described what an “ego boost” it is to have repeat customers at farmers’ markets and to have customers approach them during CSA pickup and at market and share how much they love produce they receive from these women farmers. A Flathead farmer (P11) reiterates this theme: “The rewarding part comes from the kids that come here with their families and try new foods and love picking up their veggies...I had one kid tell me she loves garlic more than any other vegetable in the whole world! That is really rad!” For this farmer, connecting with her customers is absolutely critical, as she was able to purchase her property with the assistance of several local families and their direct financial assistance. When the previous owner was ready to sell his property and farm business, instead of letting him sell both to any available buyer, community members

stepped forward and bought the property, allowing the farmer I interviewed to pay back the loan over time while running the farm business herself. Not all of the farmers I interviewed have such a strong relationship with their customers, but for some of them, this sort of direct connection and signs of support are a major factor in their choice to farm. Table 1 provides a summary of participants' reflections on the rewards of farming and the number of women who mentioned each reward. Participants were encouraged to list multiple rewards rather than identifying only one.

Wells and Gradwell (2001) describe similar motivations for farming among the women they interviewed in Iowa who participate in Community Supported Agriculture. The authors assert that "caring practice" is historically associated with women and, in the case of farming, is the prioritization of local context and relationships (2001: 107). From 15 interviews with 21 male and female CSA growers (19 women and 2 men), Wells and Gradwell asked questions pertaining to farmer backgrounds, connections with agriculture, how CSA benefits their local communities, and whether women play a unique role within CSA. As with the producers interviewed for this project, Wells and Gradwell (2001: 118) found that growers' motives differ and were rarely singular. Ultimately, they assert that CSA is "woman-friendly" in that it is scale appropriate, economically accessible, and that values "more often associated with women" are nurtured and validated in CSA. A significant difference between Wells' and Gradwell's work and this project is that the majority of the women who participated in my research rely on farming as their primary source of income. In the care-practice study, all participants maintained off-farm jobs for the majority of their income. Additionally, from what can be gleaned from direct

participant quotations, it seems that the Iowa women farmers are more motivated by environmental stewardship and caring for others than were the women farmers I interviewed. While the women farmers in western Montana who were part of my research certainly value their role in building healthy communities, their responses focus more on the simple, “real,” and “honest” (P2, P3, P12, P16, P18) qualities associated with farming as a livelihood, rather than its capacity for nurturing others.

All of the women interviewed for this research readily identify many rewards of farming, ranging from its physical nature, getting to work outside, and the satisfaction they feel by having a job that requires a diverse skill set. A third of the women also express the sentiment that with farming, the *reward is in the challenge*. In addition to reflecting on the greatest rewards of farming, participants were asked to consider the greatest challenges. The challenge most frequently mentioned was that farming is all-consuming work, especially during the growing season, and many farmers find it nearly impossible to do anything besides farm during that time of the year. Eleven of the eighteen women interviewed voice this concern, but six of them also express how fulfilling it is to complete so much work, take on so many tasks, and to be so challenged by their livelihood. Two farmers describe this sense of fulfillment in a particularly illustrative way. The first, a farmer in the Bitterroot, shares her thoughts on the challenges and rewards of farming with me as she stood in her kitchen whipping together a chocolate zucchini cake:

We're our own problem, by and large. We're the one that's in our way. When I get past myself and have forced myself to write a plan and follow that plan, communicate adequately or better with everybody that I need to communicate with, when I manage to stay on top of all the crap I've planted, when I've managed to actually harvest it on time, clean it on time, get it to the cooler the way it's supposed to be, get it to the store, get the tickets

written...when I pull it off! And maybe you can also, along the way, pull off children that are okay, maybe you can pull off having a house that you don't have to have your shots before you can enter, maybe you can end up also having friends and get food on the table before its midnight for everyone to have supper. There's so many things to keep on top of, so many balls in the air, so many spinning plates...you need to have a thousand eyeballs to keep an eye on all these details because it's a giant choreographed dance with the weather and your co-workers and your family and kids and purchasers and trucks and the gods of hail and the gods of everything else...and it's such a huge reward because you've managed to get your cilantro harvested! You told [the buyer] that you had 150 bunches left and when you just walked through the field and eyeballed it, you thought, "yeah," and then a storm rolls through the next day and you successfully harvested 150 bunches with maybe 3 bunches left in the field. It's such a great feeling to come into your strength, to come into your power, to understand what you're doing and how to do it and know that you can...sometimes. It's not always that way, but it doesn't have to be (P 13).

This participant's summary of the rewards and challenges of farming captures the feelings expressed by several other women I interviewed. They find farming challenging not only because of the amount of work to be done, but also because of the diversity of work and the range of skill sets required to do it well. In addition to being able to effectively grow food, farmers must also be able to manage the business elements of their work, such as marketing, distribution, wages, personnel, and bookkeeping. Learning this set of skills, particularly those related to managing personnel (interns and apprentices) and running a business, was another challenge voiced by nearly half of the participants. Table 2 provides a summary of participant reflections on the most challenging aspects of farming. Again, the task of learning a broad range of skills and juggling so many responsibilities was described as both a challenge and a major reward of farming, a dynamic that some women noted was responsible for the feelings of empowerment they derive from their work.

| <b>Challenges of Farming</b>   | <b>Frequency</b> |
|--|------------------|
| Relentless nature of the work, dealing with stress; social isolation that results from being geographically dispersed and so busy with farming | 11               |
| Managing one's own business (the financials, marketing, efficiency, interns)   | 7                |
| The things out of the farmer's control: weather, size of farm  | 5                |
| Long-term physical consequences of the work  | 5                |
| Major financial sacrifice, lack of capital   | 3                |
| Repetitious, mundane nature of some farm tasks   | 2                |
| Learning all the technical info to be the most successful and capable farmer possible  | 2                |

**Table 2. Women farmers' responses to the most challenging aspects of farming. Respondents were encouraged to identify as many challenges as appropriate. N=18.**

### **Empowerment through Farming**

In her research on Syrian women's participation in a plant breeding program, Galie (2013) explores farmers' sense of empowerment from engagement in educational and scientific goals. Her research raises some interesting questions on the meaning of 'empowerment.' In particular, she asks questions about who decides what 'empowerment' means and whether 'empowerment' of a particular population necessarily means a shift of power away from others. She cites Amartya Sen when she writes that "empowerment is best seen as a process of replacing the domination of circumstances and chance by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances" (2013: 60). In this view, empowerment is a process; it begins with the ability of people to define their own goals and to act upon them to achieve their chosen outcomes.

The farmers interviewed in western Montana describe opportunities for empowerment through farming in similar ways. New obstacles and challenges- such as weather, infrastructural needs, deadlines, and pests- present opportunities to identify solutions and move forward. A farmer in the Bitterroot summarized specific hurdles and choices that must be navigated on a daily basis in order to be a successful farmer (P13). A second producer, located north of Missoula, explains:

I have this whole theory of 'heroism in farming.' I think that when you're farming, there are all these opportunities to feel like what you're doing is productive and meaningful. You have to do something quickly and it's physical and there's skill involved and you produce something or save something and you compete with the elements. All of those things are empowering, I think (P7).

When asked "how might the work you're doing as a farmer contribute to the empowerment of women," farmers note how appreciative and enthusiastic many of their female interns seem to be after they complete a season of farming. Sometimes comments about former female interns focus on the interns' personal transformations and their expressions of gratitude upon completion of their internships. Other interviewees state that younger women might feel empowered to try farming on their own once they see other women farming and living a lifestyle they hope to emulate. The value of having role models, particularly female entrepreneurs and farmers, is a theme that arose multiple times in these interviews. Two farmers note the importance of having successful businesswomen as models in their own lives and express a desire to offer a similar resource for other women farmers.

In her article on women's leadership, Rosener (1989) describes how women's leadership often differs from men's and notes that women in leadership positions tend to lead by encouraging participation and sharing power and information. She also explains that seeing successful businesswomen is important for learning and mentorship purposes, but that the women in her study also want to know that the work they are doing is meaningful and will provide opportunities for learning and growth. Similarly, women farmers interviewed for this project note the importance of seeing and learning from other women entrepreneurs in their communities. Rosener's assertion that women want to know

that they are doing meaningful work and that they want to acquire new skills that allow them to grow professionally aligns with reflections from women farmers in western Montana as well. As noted earlier, women farmers I interviewed explained how the challenging nature of farming is one of the reasons it is also rewarding, in part because of the diverse skill set required, the ongoing need to develop new skills, and the abundant opportunities for creativity.

The need to acquire a “nontraditional” skill set for women while working in a non-traditional field also provides opportunity for empowerment. Several researchers whose focus is agriculture and gender have described ways farming can be empowering to women (Galie 2013; Hall and Mogyorody 2007; Trauger 2004;). One of the women I interviewed in March 2012, a young farmer in her twenties and just beginning her career, shares a similar sentiment with what is reported in the above literature:

It was just making yourself feel comfortable with the situation and not allowing the women who work for you or work around you to back out because they're scared. You back out because you've tried. You don't back out just because you don't think you can do it (P 4).

This farmer is describing the process of learning and practicing new skills through farming that she and her farm interns experience on a day-to-day basis. Her comment illustrates how women farmers regularly have the opportunity to perform work that is typically perceived as being “men’s work” and therefore have abundant opportunities to empower themselves and the women around them. Farming can require a wide range of skills, including mechanical knowledge, carpentry, knowledge of farm animals, and business savvy. The diversity of the work makes the job physically and intellectually challenging. The fact that *women* are doing this work, and are oftentimes learning it from

each other, challenges traditional notions of gender in agriculture. Farming in the United States has traditionally been perceived as a male-dominated enterprise in which women are assumed to be ‘farmwives’ and men are assumed to be ‘farmers.’ When women take on the role of farmer, whether in partnership or alone, they “transgress the traditional gender roles, work cultures, and ideologies that define the social narratives of farming” (Trauger 2004: 290).

### **You Farm Like a Girl: Benefits and Challenges**

In addition to describing the greatest rewards and challenges of farming, participants also reflected how gender has influenced their experience of agriculture. Specifically, I asked the women I interviewed whether being a woman has ever been beneficial within the context of farming and whether it has ever been a challenge. Responses sometimes jumped back and forth between challenges and benefits as participants relayed anecdotes. Of the 18 women interviewed, four women responded that they could not identify any ways in which being a woman had negatively impacted their ability to farm. A few women note the challenge of having to use farm equipment, clothes, and tools that are designed for men. These challenges are inconveniences of being a woman doing “men’s” work, but in the case of using tools and machinery built for men, one farmer referenced injuries and physical deterioration that she blames on not having access to equipment that fits her body.

Two common responses address the challenge women farmers face when they are not taken seriously by other farmers, consumers, and/or retailers. Three women recall being taught gender-specific farm duties during apprenticeship experiences. That is, these women had been encouraged to take on those farm duties traditionally considered to be

women's work, like hand weeding, use of hand tools, marketing (going to farmers' market), and other tasks that involve less use of mechanized tools or physical strength. One farmer, in describing one of her greatest current challenges, explains that she bought a relatively small piece of land to start her farm in part because she was not allowed to use the tractor on the farm where she had apprenticed. Even after 4 years working for the same farm, this particular farmer had not been allowed to use the tractor for cultivation and so did not feel comfortable farming on property larger than that which could be cultivated by hand. A farmer in the Bitterroot describes a similar experience working for another farmer. As a farm manager,

There was this assumption that I would be doing some field cultivation, which is something I had experience with. Then I remember, at one point, one of the owners telling a 19-year old male intern to do the cultivating, as opposed to just having me do it. I was appalled. I was appalled and lucky that I haven't had too much else in the way of discrimination, but I've definitely seen it at other farms (P17).

These types of reflections are consistent with findings from other research. For instance, in her study of 32 women who grew up on family farms, Leckie (2010) examines the implications of not sharing certain information with women. Leckie (2010: 318) found that "nearly all the participants could clearly recall and describe specific male-imposed limits on the kinds of farm work they were permitted to learn about or do." The farm work girls were not allowed to do fell into two categories: 1.) work that was 'heavy work' or 'dirty work' and thus should be done by men who had greater strength or stamina, and 2.) tasks that required a certain amount of finesse which girls were assumed to lack. Leckie (2010: 320) refers to this process as "myth-making" because it serves to limit what women do and know and because it reinforces the idea that there are certain tasks that only men can do.

If women are not being taught skills that are considered “male” but are taking up farming as a livelihood and wish to do so at a scale that requires such knowledge, a women farmer network could play a critical educational role for these women. Additionally, some women were embarrassed to admit, after recalling experiences of discrimination, that *they* had treated their male and female interns in similarly gendered ways. A women farmer network might not only serve to provide educational resources that women are unable to find elsewhere, but it might also provide opportunities for critical reflection on gender binaries. In turn, such consciousness-raising could transform the sustainable agriculture movement more broadly, including formative apprenticeship experiences.

Participants also note the challenge of not being taken seriously as farmers in off-farm contexts. “The tractor guy wouldn’t even talk to me,” explains one producer. “He only talked to [my husband] when we were buying our tractor. And people do think my husband grows the food a lot of the time” (P2). Another grower lives in a community with a strong German Baptist and Amish presence and mentions that “they aren’t used to seeing women in leadership, business roles...so that’s been a challenge” (P14). Aside from experiencing skepticism when searching for tractor parts or asking a neighbor for help, women farmers also describe being frustrated at not feeling respected in more public venues. One grower who has been particularly involved with organic certification advocacy describes an experience she had with another grower during a lobbying session in Helena:

He said, ‘You organic farmers who call yourselves sustainable, you’re all a bunch of liars. It’s not sustainable if you’re working so hard you’re not sustaining your family.’ And then I went home and thought about it and I

cried. Because there was some truth in what he was saying, that's for sure. But I think sometimes people like to set you up, particularly as women (P9).

Though the male farmer referenced above did not explicitly state that his criticism of “sustainable farmers” lack of time for family was specific to women, P9 notes that she was consistently the only woman lobbying in Helena during those years and that, in her opinion, he chose to criticize her because she is a full-time farmer and single mother. A number of women interviewed for this project reflect on the challenges of juggling motherhood and farming, with two of them mentioning specifically that they feel judged sometimes for making the choice to farm. Perhaps, in this way, farming is like any other occupation: when women choose to seek out employment, regardless of what it is, we risk being judged for the choice to work outside the home while being mothers. The women farmers in Hassanein's (1999) study similarly shared frustrations related to not being taken seriously as farmers, of having their voices devalued in public spaces, and having their husbands receive all the credit for their land, work, and business. One of the resources to come out of their women's network in Wisconsin was the opportunity to voice these frustrations, affirm the value of women's work in agriculture, and develop their own sense of personal agency to change these social norms (Hassanein 1999).

Finally, women note physical strength and anatomy as a challenge specifically connected to gender. The physical nature of farming came up in interviews in two main ways: women express concern that their bodies will deteriorate faster as a result of farming; and women note the slight disadvantage of having, in some cases, less physical strength or a smaller stature. Six women indicate that their size and relative strength was a gender-specific challenge.

When asked to reflect on specific benefits to being a woman farmer, most women speak vaguely to the gendered assumptions that we make about men and women and their respective strengths. Three women note that they feel well-received in farmers' market and CSA pickup scenarios and that it was possible customers perceive women farmers as being more approachable. Four farmers feel that being a woman seems advantageous when it comes to working with interns or with animals, speaking to the social norms that label women "nurturers." One farmer explains, "I think being a woman brings a different perspective to farming than most male farmers, in the type of care we want to give the land and the things we want to get out of it. I think those are different than the typical male goal" (P6). Three women mention the benefit of getting to make people aware of the fact that they are farmers and are therefore occupying a "man's" role: "I'm sure that when I drive the tractor down the road I'm getting different reactions than a man would get. And some part of me enjoys that, that I get to blow people's minds a little bit more because people are like, 'What the hell is that girl doing?!' But with a guy, they'd just expect it" (P16). Similarly, other women feel that being a woman farmer provides them with an extra opportunity to improve education and awareness of gender stereotyping, particularly when given the chance to show young women and girls that farming is an option for women. Participants also note their gender as being beneficial when it comes to financial resources; three farmers mention that they were eligible for certain federal grants for farmers due to their gender. Four participants could not identify any benefits to being a woman farmer.

## Conclusion

Women farmers practicing sustainable agriculture in western Montana find their work rewarding because of its challenging, diverse, and non-traditional nature. Farming is “real” work that produces tangible results and allows the women in the study to live in a way that aligns with their values. Farming facilitates self-sufficiency, allows producers to give back to their communities, and provides women with the opportunity to become entrepreneurs. The women I interviewed come to farming specifically for these reasons and many have opted out of more professional positions that they feel have less tangible results and do not integrate as well with their values.

Farming can be exhausting, all-consuming work when it is a farmer’s primary occupation. The combination of Montana’s rural geography and a grueling farming season can leave women farmers feeling socially and geographically isolated. But having a job that demands efficiency and constant adaptability is not entirely negative. Many women in this study love farming for these exact reasons and appreciate that farming demands efficiency and needing to know a diverse, often traditionally male, skill set. For these women, the rewards of farming are found mostly in the challenge. Pursuing demanding work and succeeding is also what makes farming empowering for women. Needing to learn mechanical skills and other traditionally male farm tasks provides opportunities for challenge followed by success, the perfect recipe for empowerment. Participants also recognize the fulfillment they receive from teaching other women how to farm and how, for some, seeing other women farmers and entrepreneurs has inspired them to take on the challenge of farming full-time. In western Montana, the presence of experienced women

farmers and the emergence of beginning farmers have led to the creation of an intergenerational web of women producers practicing sustainable agriculture. These women are learning from each other and building an alternative food system with the help of this informal social network of women farmers.

Hearing women farmers talk about their experiences becoming farmers, learning from each other, and pursuing agriculture as an occupation raises the question: what is the role of agriculture in deconstructing gender differences and prescribed notions of how each gender works in the world? When taken out of the context of agriculture, the challenges and benefits articulated by these women could apply to many professions. Women wish to be taken seriously in the work they choose to pursue, regardless of it being a “man’s” role or not. Work that is meaningful, tangible, honest, and productive is often fulfilling. Being a mentor to another woman or providing a model of leadership and entrepreneurship is also often rewarding. Finding a supportive network of women with similar values, a similar lifestyle, and similar challenges can be validating and empowering. These are not necessarily specific to agriculture, but agriculture provides a context in which major challenges for women emerge because it has traditionally been labeled “men’s work.” Moving forward, the next chapter turns to women’s thoughts specifically on a farmer network, existing communication and relationships among growers, and potential resources a network might provide.

## CHAPTER 4: THE POTENTIAL FOR A NETWORK

This project attempts to go beyond the process of collecting women farmers' experiences and comparing them to literature on gender and sustainable agriculture. I asked women to reflect on their existing communication with other growers, resources for farmers that would be useful and that are not currently being offered in western Montana, and other questions that help uncover the potential for a farmer network. Given the diverse experiences of women farming in western Montana, are there resources that women farmers would find useful? Do these women see any value in a women-only space for farmers? Are there shared experiences among women farmers that indicate a need for a supportive, educational resource specific to women? Chapter four describes participants' current communication with each other, their membership in existing farmer social networks and benefits farmers receive from membership, interviewees' responses to the question of missing resources for farmers in western Montana, and how a women-only space for farmers might meet interviewees' needs. In essence, this chapter moves beyond women farmers' experiences to gauge their interest in developing a women farmer network and compares participants' thoughts to related topics in existing academic literature.

### **Existing Communication among Growers**

As described in academic literature and in resources produced by existing networks, farmer networks can provide a multitude of resources to their members. Educational workshops, additional opportunities for farmer social interaction, mentorship, farm business and marketing information, and general group support are all potential offerings

of farmer networks. Western Montana is home to a number of organizations that serve to network farmers, providing numerous opportunities for information exchange and socialization to some producers in the region. However, because of the size of the state, geographic distance between growers can be substantial. Farmers living in the Flathead Valley are not necessarily members of organizations that are centered in the Missoula Valley, as the driving time between the two can be as much as three hours. Determining existing communication, both type and frequency, among women farmers is important in identifying the potential role of a women farmer network, its geographic scope, and meeting frequency.

Regardless of geographic location, nearly all of the women I interviewed (14 of 18) acknowledged a moderate amount of communication with other growers to share technical advice and information, or to have conversation in informal settings, such as at farmers' markets. Yet, the extent to which women farmers communicate with each other and feel a sense of connectedness to other farmers (regardless of gender) seems primarily related to geography and membership in existing farmer-centered organizations. Neither Homegrown nor the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative extend as far north as the Flathead valley, eliminating the two most frequently-cited mechanisms for frequent communication among interviewees. Many women farming in the Jocko, Moiese, Missoula, and Bitterroot Valleys are part of these existing social networks, though not all of these women report regular communication with other growers. Half of the women interviewed respond that they currently communicate regularly with other farmers in western Montana. Those who occupy leadership positions within the WMGC and Homegrown point

out that their leadership roles require consistent communication with other producers on a variety of topics, but that their engagement with other growers is not necessarily social in nature. Through several interviews, I learned of a book club comprised entirely of women farmers in the Moiese and Jocko valleys that convenes in the winter and contributes somewhat to a sense of connection and relationship among its participants. Only four women indicate that they “rarely” communicate with other producers, citing barriers such as lack of time, geographic isolation, the shortage of farmers of a similar age and/or with similarly sized operations, and historic tensions among some growers in the region.

Surprisingly, all but two of the women who participated in this research indicate a desire to have greater communication among growers, more social interaction, and a stronger sense of connectedness, though opinions vary on how feasible more interaction would be. One grower in the Flathead explains, “Communication is pretty minimal during the [growing] season. I feel very much on my own for the most part and I don’t know a lot of women around here my age who are doing what I’m doing” (P11). A farmer in the Bitterroot describes how, despite existing food-related organizations, she does not feel that farmers have enough time to just socialize: “No one has time to get together and talk about all the things we’d want to chat about, that’s just how far apart and distracted we are. I saw [a woman farmer friend] at the Homegrown meeting on Saturday. We only have two Homegrown meetings a year and they’re filled up with business” (P 13). Participants seem particularly interested in more opportunities for social interaction within the regional community of sustainable agriculturalists. This is a surprising theme to arise from these

interviews, considering the size of the WMGC and Homegrown and the participation both organizations require of their members.

Participants who report their involvement in the WMGC as being the primary reason for communication with other farmers mention their leadership roles, their farms as drop-off and pick-up sites for the WMGC, and the annual meetings as being major opportunities for farmer-to-farmer interaction. Involvement in Homegrown was also repeatedly mentioned in interviews as an important motive for communication among growers. Since the goal of this research is to identify interest in a women farmer network and the potential role(s) it might play for growers, it is important to hear what farmers currently gain from organizations such as WMGC and Homegrown and what the potential gaps in resources may be.

All of the farmers were asked to identify benefits they receive from their membership in several of the agriculture-related organizations that serve farmers in western Montana. In addition to WMGC and Homegrown, the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (AERO) is a nonprofit based in Helena, Montana that supports sustainable agriculture and energy generation. The Montana Organic Association (MOA) is a fourth organization currently supporting a few of the farmers I interviewed, particularly those most engaged in work to protect and promote organic standards and certification. Beginning last year, a small group of farmers, with the support of MOA, AERO, and the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Montana, initiated a seed saving school that has also served to connect farmers and students around a common goal. The goals and outreach capacity of each of these entities varies greatly, so

participants were asked to identify their membership in each and to describe any benefits they derive from their involvement with any of the organizations.

### **Part of a Bigger Movement**

As noted earlier, all of the women I interviewed indicate that they see their work producing food as being more than just a livelihood. For many, growing healthy, environmentally-friendly food is as much about social change as it is making money. Multiple women express the sentiment that one does not take up farming for the money. As participants in their regional sustainable agriculture and local food movement efforts, the women farmers I interviewed recognize that their work is also part of national and global movements to change the existing dominant food system. One thing that helps these women feel connected to larger food system movements is their participation in regional networks such as Homegrown and the WMGC. Homegrown, formed in 2005, consists of member farms all located within a 75 mile radius of Missoula. Homegrown's website affirms the group's commitment to the values of community, resilience, and environmental stewardship and openly embraces the political nature of food system work and sustainable agriculture<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, WMGC's values include community, appropriate technology, land stewardship, and social equity, articulating again the interconnectedness between agricultural systems, environmental health, community, and social wellbeing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On its website under the "Mission" tab, the organization explains: "Our relationship with the earth through agriculture is wholly dependent on our relationship with our community. For organic farmers, this relationship is being defined by organic certification under the National Organic Program. We appreciate the value of certification for growers who cannot engage in a direct relationship with their customers. Our organization, on the other hand, will prioritize the relationship between growers and customers, thus enhancing the value of community and a local economy."  
<http://www.homegrownmontana.org/mission.html>

<sup>9</sup> WMGC's website lists all four of these values as those embodied in the central goal of helping to build a sustainable local food system. <http://wmgcoop.com/our-mission>

On a regional scale, Homegrown, a local eco-label, attracts producers who practice alternative agriculture, a values-based decision rooted in a strong environmental and social ethic. For its members, Homegrown seems to act as a supportive, values-based community. Producers explain that they are members of Homegrown because they appreciate “being part of a group of like-minded people” (P2) and because “it’s good to know a group of people with the same goals and values” (P5). All of the producers who are members of both the WMGC and Homegrown explain that while the benefits they receive from membership in the WMGC tend to be “business related” (better marketing of their products, more effective business planning), the benefits of Homegrown membership relate to feeling supported in a particular set of values evident in the type of agriculture they practice. Farmers recognize that WMGC membership also facilitates some social opportunities, but the major benefits associated with membership tend to be business-centered. Hassanein et al. (2013) found that many WMGC members feel a sense of community, connection, and shared values through their co-op membership. They write, “For participants, this sense of community revolved around shared values, personal interactions, staff appreciation, and opportunities for knowledge-sharing” (2013: 67). By giving producers opportunities to meet each other and share information in network settings, the WMGC and Homegrown create community on a regional scale and connect farmers to the national-level work that is taking place to change our dominant food system. For one producer, this was also true of her involvement in the Montana Organic Association (MOA), which she calls her “shot in the arm.” For this farmer, MOA provides a similar set of benefits: a community of like-minded producers, educational opportunities,

and a connection to national and international activists working to preserve the integrity of the organic label (P9).

How each of the farmers I interviewed interprets a “sense of community” is difficult to describe. For some, a sense of community comes from feeling supported in what you do, that is, from having a group of people with similar values reinforce that the work you do is important. Farmer networks that focus on shared values and information-sharing also have the potential to limit feelings of competition among producers. Four participants cite this as a benefit of their Homegrown membership, explaining that Homegrown emphasizes relationship and shared values over product marketing and profit, decreasing the sense of competition among producers in the network (P2, P4, P17, P18). One producer explains, “It’s a lot of farmers now in a pretty small market and you start to get annoyed with people...but when you see them face-to-face, all that falls away and you remember, ‘oh yeah, we’re all in this together!’” (P2). Another grower, reflecting on the difference between WMGC and Homegrown says, “There isn’t a competitive element really within [Homegrown]. It’s not specifically a business association like the co-op, for example, where there’s some degree of intercompetition” (P17). The potential for network involvement to counteract feelings of competition was something Hassanein (1999:169) also notes hearing from the farmers in her study. Annual meetings that include all (or most) producer-members are part of the membership obligations for both Homegrown and the WMGC and are cited by several farmers as being one of the most significant benefits of membership. Additionally, a requirement of Homegrown membership is that members tour another producer’s farm once a year, and possibly more than that if they wish. Several growers

(P7, P8, P14, P16) mentioned these farm tours specifically as benefits of membership, with one grower noting, “I’m sure I could call anyone up and it wouldn’t be a big deal [to visit their farm], but it gives you a reason to visit someone else’s farm and ask detailed questions...I’ve learned a lot that way” (P8).

Aside from providing a structure for farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange, farm tours and annual membership meetings serve to build trust and relationships between growers. For some producers, this results in more than just a lack of competition. One woman, describing her appreciation for Homegrown, notes, “I hope I get to know all the growers and their farms and can then share that with my customers. Then, if I know all the members of this organization and my customers trust me, hopefully they can trust these other farmers as well” (P8). For this producer and others, knowledge of other farms within this organization enables better customer service and, because she is sending business to another small-scale sustainable producer in the region, supports sustainable agriculture more broadly. Another participant explains, “If somebody’s looking for something we don’t have, there’s a great directory of a lot of other farms in the region. If we don’t have something, one of those farms is going to have it” (P15). Having connections to other farmers for technical questions and occasional assistance with projects (cultivating, fence building, haying) is also a major benefit of farmer network membership.

Three of the women I interviewed have been farming for four years or less and they expressed a sense of gratitude at having an almost immediate community of farmers upon becoming members of the WMGC and Homegrown. One of the newer producers acknowledges that her choice to join Homegrown and the WMGC was “such a big step for

us in terms of getting to know people and advancing our place in the community...I feel like we're twelve steps ahead of where we would have been if we had waited to join after our second or third year farming" (P6). Another beginning farmer describes how joining Homegrown made her feel as though she was suddenly being taken more seriously by other producers: "We just felt like we had passed the test, like we were worth respecting...I think it kind of showed a seriousness on our part to join because you have to fill out an application and show up at meetings, represent yourself" (P8). Membership in both Homegrown and the WMGC extends south of Missoula into the Bitterroot valley and north along the Highway 93 corridor, almost to the Flathead. A number of women report feeling connected to those farms that are their neighbors, but a few express appreciation at being connected to growers in other parts of the state through their Homegrown, WMGC, and MOA membership (P7, P9, P16). For these women, having their personal farm connections extend outside of their immediate valleys relates to their sense of being part of a social and environmental movement that extends beyond western Montana and to the ability of a local foods movement to take root and spread across a region.

### **What's Missing?**

Western Montana is home to many organizations and agencies whose work is focused on local food production, sustainable agriculture, and improving the viability of small-scale agriculture. Homegrown and the WMGC are only two of these. Additionally, AERO, MOA, the Community Food & Agriculture Coalition (CFAC), the Montana State University agricultural extension offices, the University of Montana, the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), and the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center

(MMFEC) all work to support the viability of farms and a more localized food system. With so many organizations potentially connecting farmers and providing agriculture-related programming, what resources and opportunities could possibly be missing? Asking women farmers this question was intended to identify possible events, programs, and resources that a women farmer network might be able to offer that are not currently available or accessible to women producers.

The 18 women I interviewed for this study reported diverse responses to the question of “what’s missing?” (Table 3). They cited a number of factors affect what resources are lacking for each farmer including geographic location, size of farm, and growers’ awareness of opportunities that are offered by existing organizations. Two key themes became apparent as I assessed the women’s responses to this question: First, it was difficult to identify two or three “most frequent” responses that appeared across interviews, as the most frequently cited needs were still only mentioned five times. Farmer responses were incredibly diverse. Nine farmers mentioned a need for specific on-farm technical knowledge, but no more than two growers repeated any of the specific topics that should be covered (food safety, soil, climate adaptation, etc.) Second, many of the opportunities and resources that farmers expressed an interest in seeing are currently being offered by one of the organizations noted above, but farmers were either not aware they were taking place or the need to travel to a workshop or event was a barrier to their participation. In an effort to represent the diversity of responses, the table below (Table 3) lists the “resource” or “opportunity” mentioned by participants along with the number of

respondents who mentioned each. Participants were encouraged to reflect for awhile on the question and to offer as many suggestions and ideas as they could.

| <b>Resources and Opportunities</b>   | <b># of times mentioned</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|
| On-farm technical (included information on food safety regulations, climate change adaptation, production advice, soil workshops, and similar opportunities) | 9                           |
| Equipment sharing cooperative or shared winter storage   | 6                           |
| Financial planning & business advice (personnel management, beginning farmer-specific resources, financial planning)   | 6                           |
| Greater sense of what other communities are doing to build their local food movement; greater “local food” promotion   | 4                           |
| “Hard skills” workshops (tractoring, tractor maintenance, carpentry, etc.)   | 3                           |
| Cooperative seed saving  | 3                           |
| Beginning farmer resources to help access land   | 2                           |
| More social opportunities for farmers  | 2                           |
| Acknowledgement of prevalence/work of women farmers  | 2                           |
| Time saving & efficiency guidance; “Balancing life with farming”   | 2                           |
| Farming-specific self-care advice (taking care of your body)   | 2                           |
| Production standards for vegetables  | 1                           |
| Ag tourism resources   | 1                           |
| Information for growers about adding value to their products   | 1                           |

**Table 3. Resources and opportunities women farmers find missing from agriculture resources in western Montana.**

The most frequently cited needs for farmers is greater access to agricultural extension-type resources, specifically related to soil health and mixed vegetable production. Many of the women who mentioned the need for better or more available extension services explained that they often turn to web-based resources with their farming questions, noting that much of the agricultural extension expertise in Montana focuses on commodity agriculture, not small-scale alternative agriculture. Several women also mentioned their interest in seeing an equipment cooperative develop, noting that equipment sharing would help defray some of the costs that beginning farmers face.

While some of the needs participants mentioned are not gender specific, some are very much so. For instance, women who express interest in workshops on carpentry, tractor work, tractor maintenance, and fence building explain that they had not necessarily been encouraged to learn these skills in their apprenticeship and internship experiences, perhaps because of their gender. Though not specifically asked about their internship experiences, five participants mention that they wish they had been encouraged to learn more farm skills that have traditionally been viewed as being “men’s jobs,” like tractor work and carpentry, including a few women who now have husbands or partners who perform these tasks. As noted earlier, two women recall being frustrated during their internships at being given all the “hand work,” while male interns or employees were asked to learn and perform tasks that require mechanical knowledge. These experiences reflect the socialization that men and women receive, socialization that impacts decisions about livelihood and, in this case, the resources that are available to women who choose to farm solo.

### **Resources for *Women* Farmers**

In addition to being asked what resources they feel are missing for farmers in western Montana, interviewees were asked about resources they might want to see offered through a woman farmer network in particular. Responses indicate that women farmers are interested in a women farmer network serving a variety of purposes for its members, including social support, business resources, training opportunities, and opportunities for community service and food-related activism. The following are the most common responses, all of which were mentioned by at least two participants:

- Skills-based workshops & trainings (tractoring, tractor maintenance, carpentry, fence building, using a chain saw)
- Self-care opportunities, including resources to help farmers balance farming and family life, farming-specific physical care, how to prevent burnout
- Community service and activism (mentoring new women farmers, promoting awareness of women farmers, outreach to youth and schools around local food and sustainable agriculture)
- Online networking and listserv
- Access to resources for women entrepreneurs, like women-specific loans and business opportunities
- Supportive network of women farmers that provides space for discussion of farming as a lifestyle, farming with children, farming alone, etc.
- Cooperative work projects that coordinate a team of farmers that rotates to various farms

Some of the women who expressed interest in skills workshops (like tracting, carpentry) are women who are farming solo and so do not have a farming partner who can offer a more mechanically-oriented skill set on-farm. Yet, women who *do* have access to someone who is able to perform these tasks are also enthusiastic about learning these skills themselves. One woman explained her close working relationship to several male farmers and that she typically calls on them for carpentry and mechanical assistance. Still, the idea of having mechanical skills and being more self-reliant is appealing to her, particularly when presented with the possibility of learning these skills from another woman farmer.

Not all participants are interested in learning mechanical and construction skills. Three women, all of whom are married to men who participate equally in farm operations, explained that they already feel overwhelmed with their own farm duties and are not interested in increasing their on-farm responsibilities. One responds, “I don’t want to do those things, I don’t care about those things. I’m on a need-to-know basis. I’ve got a guy who can do all those things. I mean, I wish I was interested in those things, but I’ve never

had to be” (P13). Another grower offers a similar reflection, saying, “I can’t put any more on my plate, so I’m leaving it on [my husband’s] plate and I don’t have any interest in things like that...and that’s terrible to say because I *should* be interested in things like that” (P2). Another producer felt that the idea of learning a whole new set of mechanical skills was overwhelming enough that she might even choose not to farm rather than have to perform tasks like tractor maintenance herself (P3). The diversity of responses to this question illustrates the extent to which farming in partnership or farming alone can impact the resources women farmers feel they need. Generally, the younger women who are farming alone or who, like their partners, are just beginning to learn all the skills they need to farm successfully are the ones most enthusiastic about learning skills perceived to be men’s work. Older women and women who farm with their husbands sometimes recognize that these sorts of trainings and workshops would have been helpful when they were just starting to farm or if they were farming alone. In any case, farmers’ interest in technical skills workshops reflects how useful a women farmer network could potentially be for those seeking skills women are not typically encouraged to learn.

Women also mentioned their interest in having a forum for discussion about the intersections of family, farming, and “farming as lifestyle.” In other words, several participants reflect that farming is a lifestyle, meaning that it is challenging to be a farmer and to participate in any other activities. These women emphasize that farming is physically and mentally intense and, depending on the season, sometimes all-consuming. Several farmers note that farming can also be “isolating” (P3, P8, P11). As their farms have taken up more and more time, their personal relationships (particularly

relationships with non-farm women) have suffered (P11, P14). Five of the women in the study are relatively new mothers and two of them express an interest in having a supportive group of women with whom they can discuss the intersection of farming and motherhood (P3, P14). Participants who have already raised kids note that they also might have appreciated a women-only space for similar conversations when they were younger and beginning to juggle motherhood with their entrepreneurship (P9, P2, P14). Conversely, two women with no children express concern that their choice to not have children might give them less of a connection to women within a woman farmer network (P4, P12). With some hoping to see a supportive resource for mothers who are farming and with others concerned that only mothers would be supported in a network, a network would ideally incorporate resources and opportunities for women in both situations and be sensitive to the diverse experiences of women choosing to farm.

Six out of the eighteen women emphasized that a women's network should include some sort of activism or community-service component. For some, the emphasis was mostly on a need to be productive, "give back," and "not just sit around." For others, the idea of the network focusing energy on mentorship of other women, educating young children about food choices, and using outreach to increase the visibility of women farmers in western Montana comes from a desire for civic engagement and activism. "I see a lot of value in teaching young girls to farm, or at least opening their minds to the idea," explains one producer. "Maybe that should be the role of a woman farmer network: that we come together and we teach, not just each other, but the community, that there's this group of women farmers" (P8). When describing what she would want to get out of network

involvement, another says, “My ultimate plan is to have winters for not just relaxation, but for political involvement...I feel like I’m a very political person and unfortunately, that’s something that I lose during the summer. Depending on the focus and scope, that would be interesting to me” (P17).

Finally, four women expressed interest in arranging a collaborative work program through a women farmer network. Though their ideas varied somewhat in structure, the basic idea is to arrange work days on different farms and have other women farmers volunteer for a day or half a day to accomplish a particular project. In order to share the labor, the group would work on a different farm each time. One producer feels that this would automatically structure time for the group to bond and get to know each other better: “I like the idea of doing something that is tangible and goal-oriented...I think the social aspect would be more enjoyable and natural for me if there was an active component” (P16). Nearly all of the women interviewed were supportive of a relaxation and self-care focused retreat, noting that it would be particularly useful to offer sessions on exercise and stretches that address common farmer injuries and strains as well as stress management techniques.

### **Why Women-Only?**

Farmers *love* to talk about their work with each other. Like many people who share a common language and vocation, farmers can talk all day about agriculture, things they have tried and that failed, marketing strategies, things they do not have time for because of farming, their families, and how all of these topics connect. I witnessed this firsthand at a Homegrown meeting my first autumn in Montana and again during the women farmer retreat that took place in February 2014. Therefore, it was no surprise that the women I

interviewed were receptive and sometimes enthusiastic when I mentioned that I was exploring the potential for a women farmers' network in our region. Rather than a shared interest in a particular crop, similar farm scale, business model, or other organizational membership, women farmer network members are primarily united by their gender identity and a shared social location. Of her research in Wisconsin, Hassanein (1999: 140) reports that the membership of the farmer network was equally diverse as the group of women I interviewed: "The network included women with husbands, women with lesbian partners, and single women," as well as women with varying levels of financial resources. The network's mission reads, in part, "to share personal experiences, technical information, and marketing strategies" (1999: 146). A central role of the Wisconsin network, in other words, is to provide the space for women to reflect on their experiences as women farmers, to gain awareness of others' experiences, and to support each other by validating the work they all perform in the context of agriculture. Similarly, a women farmer network in western Montana could provide women with space to discuss being women and farming, despite their varying economic resources, business models, farm scales, and partnership situations.

To determine their interest in a women-specific network, I asked interviewees: "Do you think having a women-only space to discuss farming and sustainable agriculture would be valuable? Why or why not?" Participants offered a variety of responses, though none indicated that she thought having a women-only space for farmers was a bad idea. Responses that were not immediately enthusiastic about the idea of women-only space shared two themes and are held by four of the farmers interviewed: the first is held by

women who have been farming for 15 years or more and feel like a women's network holds less appeal for a veteran farmer with already well established social relationships with other farmers, an established market, and who has, perhaps, already considered how gender impacts her experience farming. The second theme came from women whose farms are located close to Missoula and who are fairly involved with the WMGC and Homegrown. These farmers are not opposed to a women farmer network, but they already feel quite supported; a women farmer book club meets much of their need for socialization with other women. Finally, one farmer in the Flathead noted that she feels getting farmers together in general is needed and so feels that segregating farmers by gender would be less important: "At this point, I just feel like we need to get male and female farmers together. It's hard for me to skip that completely and just go straight to the women because we would leave out a lot of the people who need these resources as well" (P12).

Aside from these four farmers, interviewees note a number of reasons why women-only space might be valuable. One grower explains,

I feel really supported by both men and women in my profession, but at the same time, it comes back to some of the skill development for me. I think that as a farmer, you try to do the things that you're most efficient at and then move over when someone else is more efficient at something. Usually, that means that men are working on the carpentry and mechanical things and that's fine. But if I *want* to build those skills...sometimes it's hard to build those skills when men are present because they'll take over...and I think there's just value in people of the same gender spending time together (P16).

Another producer reflects on a similar dynamic on her farm, which she runs with her husband. When talking about the division of labor between her and her husband and their unique approaches to farm work, she reports, "We've ironed this out in our lives together,

but for the longest time I would say, ‘when I ask for your help, I don’t mean for you to come and take the tool out of my hand’” (P10). The value of having an opportunity to learn some of the skills not typically taught to women farmers (tractor skills and maintenance, carpentry) was expressed by a few other participants as well.

From her observations of network activities and gatherings, Hassanein (1999) describes the interconnectedness of gender-related issues (such as the value of women-specific spaces for learning and sharing) and the technical aspects of farming and marketing. Some of the women in Hassanein’s study reflect on the importance of seeing other women’s approaches to mechanical challenges, selection of tools, and working with entities such as banks and other agricultural organizations, indicating that the educational function of the network is important. The Wisconsin women farmers’ stories illustrate that “the personal, the social, and the technical were fused during the knowledge-exchange process” that took place during network activities and events (1999: 157). Hassanein’s study demonstrates the important role women farmer networks can play in providing women farmers with safe space for the knowledge-sharing and social interactions that ultimately serve to acknowledge and legitimate their work.

Combining motherhood and farming was another topic frequently mentioned when asked about the value of women-only space. Women with young children, as well as those with grown children, note that having a community in which they could discuss the intersections of farming and raising a family would be valuable. One producer reflects, when describing how she and her husband have navigated farming and parenthood, “For me, I don’t consider myself just a ‘woman farmer,’ but a farmer in partnership. Still there

are challenges that are unique to my situation that my husband doesn't have to deal with, so I think it would be nice to get in touch with other women" (P3). Similarly, another grower explains, "I think farming for women is different than farming for men. Just having that be spoken and acknowledged...I think we have different challenges. I have to think that the challenge of raising children and farming is something that would warrant conversation" (P10). Several participants also noted that they would feel more comfortable speaking up in a community of women farmers than at a meeting with men in the room, too. The recognition that there are challenges unique to women farmers and that a women-only space could support women by acknowledging and raising awareness of these differences coincides with some of the research on the role of women farmer networks mentioned earlier. Many of the women who participated in this study confirm that having a community of women to learn from and with and that could provide support for women's roles in agriculture would be valuable.

## CHAPTER 5: THE RETREAT

Women who choose to pursue sustainable agriculture as their livelihood sometimes face different challenges and experience their choice to farm differently than men, as reflected in the statements of the women I interviewed. Not only are they women choosing to pursue farming in a male farmer-dominated society, they are also choosing alternative methods and priorities in a commodity and efficiency-dominated farming system within the United States. With this in mind, I began to plan and organize a two-day retreat for women farmers to explore the idea of creating a network in western Montana attentive to both of these “differences.” After checking with my contacts at AERO and Oregon State University (i.e., their extension personnel), I felt that it was appropriate to use some of AERO’s funds to coordinate a retreat. My first step after hearing from women farmers directly what they might wish to see offered through a farmer network was to establish a leadership team to assist in the planning of the retreat and ensure that its goals and activities would effectively serve the needs of women farmers.

The three women who comprise the retreat leadership team expressed very positive feelings about the potential role of a women farmer network in their interviews. Additionally, they represent the geographic diversity of the farmers I interviewed, with one farmer each from the Bitterroot, the Flathead, and the Missoula areas. A fourth woman, at the conclusion of the retreat, seemed interested in joining the leadership team and operates a farm north of Missoula and south of the Flathead, rounding out the geographic distribution of the leadership. None of the women explicitly volunteered to take a leadership role in planning the retreat during the interviews. Rather, I considered the

personalities of the women I interviewed, their geographic distribution, and the appropriate size of a leadership committee, and then personally asked three women who seemed well-suited to the job. All of them agreed to be involved without any apparent hesitation. After coding the interviews and consolidating ideas about the desire for a retreat and potential retreat activities, I began to engage these women in the planning process. The remainder of this chapter describes our planning process, the retreat, and some of the comments and reflections that emerged from the retreat sessions themselves.

### **Putting Data into Practice**

The steps and energy involved in event coordination and implementation are different than those involved in conducting academic research. One of my favorite elements of this graduate project is that it blends these tasks. Instead of simply deciding a women farmer network, because of their success in other communities similar to our own, *should* exist in western Montana, I heard directly from women for whom the retreat was to include and benefit the extent of their interest and what resources they want so that I could plan an event that was likely to meet their particular needs and interests. Conversations and decisions within the leadership team were repeatedly informed by the qualitative data I had collected through conversations with women farmers.

From mid-December until the retreat a couple of months later, I used the leadership team as a brainstorming resource, taking advantage of our Smartphone technology by holding a series of 3 conference calls leading up to the retreat. Based on what I had heard from participants, the leadership team and I decided that a 2-day retreat focused generally on self-care, relaxation, and building new relationships would be most

appropriate. The goal was to attract women farmers from all over western Montana, so we selected a relatively central location for the event and a venue that was economically feasible for our farmer participants. Several interviewees had identified that the end of February would be a good time for an overnight event, as it is late enough in the winter that vacation travel has already concluded, but spring greenhouse work and farm planning has not fully begun. Our retreat leadership team chose Sunday, February 23-Monday, February 24, 2014, and Alameda's Hot Springs Retreat as the setting for our first "official" gathering of western Montana's women farmer network. Alameda's was chosen not only for its central location, but because of the owner's interest in supporting the local food system and farmers. He demonstrated his commitment by offering us a meeting space and kitchen for no charge, as long as some profit could be made by providing us overnight accommodations.

As soon as we set a date, I began developing an invitation list that included, of course, all of the women I interviewed in 2012 and 2013 in addition to women farmers who were not part of my research but who had attended earlier gatherings and had expressed interest in the idea. The members of the leadership team and research participants spread the word even further, resulting in an initial list of attendees that included several women whose names were unfamiliar to me. I used the Homegrown and WMGC membership lists to conduct additional outreach, including an initial informational email with the retreat date, location, and some activities that could be expected in the final agenda. I sent a follow-up email once the leadership team had developed a more detailed agenda and then sent a third message to women who confirmed their participation via email with a list of

suggested items to bring, a request for dietary specifications, and details about the event. To make sure all research participants knew about the event, leadership team members personally reached out to 9 women farmers, a strategy I believe was responsible for a few last-minute decisions to join the gathering. Grant funds designated for retreat costs totaled \$600 and the leadership team decided that charging participants a small sum for an overnight retreat was reasonable. To make the retreat as accessible to as many women as possible, a sliding scale fee of \$15-\$25 was set and, combined with the grant funds, could easily cover food, printing costs, and massages for all attendees. I interpret the fact that many retreat participants contributed more than \$25 to be a sign of its value to them and their support. By the time the retreat rolled around, we had 18 women confirmed to attend, 2 non-farmer presenters confirmed, and an AERO staff member available to assist with logistics.

To our credit, the leadership team recognized that facilitating a retreat in late February could present some unpredictable challenges, such as intense winter weather. We were right. Western Montana received several inches of fluffy white precipitation the Saturday before our network gathering, resulting in slightly decreased attendance. Five of our eighteen registered participants ultimately decided not to risk the drive on the snowy, icy roads, as did one of our presenters. But we proceeded with our 13 attendees and retreat agenda that included soaking in hot springs, massages, a presentation from Maarten Fischer, a local educator focused on multifunctional agriculture and care farming, and lots of delicious food. We began our gathering at noon on Sunday and

concluded our activities around 2pm on Monday, taking time to discuss “next steps” and future leadership before saying goodbye (see Appendix D for full retreat schedule).

With the snow falling outside and a wood fire giving our gathering an especially cozy feeling, we began our retreat with a welcome and introductions. Many of the participants already knew each other, but not in all cases. Several women acknowledged how nice it was to see other women farmers they had not seen in awhile, particularly in a setting that allowed for longer conversations and was not focused on business (as often the case at WMGC and Homegrown meetings). During introductions, each participant shared the name of her farm and a general description of her operation, including, in some cases, marketing strategies and hopes for future growth. I also asked women to share why they chose to attend the retreat and what they hoped to get out of their participation in the retreat. The primary response to the question of participation was that it provided a chance for socializing that is not normally available and that the retreat was an opportunity to meet new farmers from outside each person’s typical social circle. Allowing plenty of time for introductions and socializing throughout the event seemed like important elements to beginning the retreat and exploring a potential network. Since many of the women in attendance felt the social element of the retreat was an important one, introductions and sharing were central to getting the retreat started on the right note.

One of the challenges of farming mentioned by several research participants is the physical wear and tear resulting from bending over, lifting heavy objects, using tools designed for men’s strength and anatomy, and a minimally mechanized farm operation.

Physical injury is certainly something that male farmers struggle with as well, but a number of the women I interviewed reflected that an occasional challenge of farming as a woman was having insufficient physical strength to perform certain farm tasks. This was not always described as a challenge; a few women also reflected that their relative lack of strength made them more creative farmers and required ingenuity to perform the same tasks that a stronger male might not think twice about. Women who mentioned the physical toll of farming as a major challenge included the repetitive nature of certain tasks and the amount of time spent bending or squatting. In response, one of the retreat sessions was dedicated to physical therapy. Antara Quinones, a physical therapist from Alpine Physical Therapy in Missoula, was invited to lead a session on farming-specific stretches, exercises, and injury prevention. Unfortunately, because of the winter weather we experienced the day before the retreat, Antara did not feel comfortable traveling to Hot Springs, so this session was canceled. We soaked in hot springs and visited with each other instead.

The second speaker was Maarten Fischer, an agricultural educator from the Netherlands who helps farmers develop unique and multifunctional business strategies. At the recommendation of one of our leadership committee members who had already heard Maarten speak, we invited him to share some of his ideas at the retreat. His presentation included numerous examples of Dutch farmers' approaches to multifunctional agriculture and care farming, most of which involve bringing non-farmer citizens onto farms to engage and educate them on farming issues. Care farming, according to Maarten's presentation, adds a therapeutic component to farm operations,

bringing people into contact with the outdoors and animals to challenge them physically and give them a sense of purpose. In many of Maarten's examples, care farming resulted in decreased health care costs from the improved conditions of patients asked to perform daily physical tasks and the resulting improved quality of life. Retreat participants seemed very receptive to Maarten's ideas; the question and answer period at the end was lengthy and none of the attendees found the presence of a male speaker at a women farmer retreat to be problematic. Many of the women I interviewed (several of whom were in attendance at the retreat) have incorporated educational and community-focused programs into their business models, making Maarten's presentation even more relevant. One participant, during her interview, even expressed the feeling that her farm's integration of community events, dinners, and educational programs was likely a result of her influence on the farm, rather than her husband's (P10). Maarten's presentation and the resulting discussion were a highlight of the retreat.

The last scheduled session on the first day was an opportunity for me to share some of the major themes to arise from my research and turn the themes into discussion. At the time of the gathering, I had not completed all of my analysis but was able to share a summary of women's thoughts on a network, including structure, activities, and existing relationships among farmers. The women were particularly interested in hearing participant's responses to my questions about feminism: "Do you consider yourself a feminist and how do you define feminism?" Several women at the retreat who consider themselves feminists were surprised to hear that a few research participants hesitated to label themselves "feminists." This sparked interesting conversation about the label, its

meaning, and the history of feminism. At the end of the retreat, I heard that these women followed up with each other and continued the discussion during meals and soaks in hot springs, indicating their interest in these topics beyond the structure of our retreat sessions. Aside from our conversations about feminism and labels, the women did not seem surprised by the themes and outcomes I shared from my research and expressed enthusiasm for attending my research defense in April.

Feminist research methodology proposes that the real “experts” in qualitative research are the participants themselves (Harding & Norberg 2005) and that the tendency to give voice to (oftentimes white, male) “experts” is illustrative of the patriarchy within western culture. In reflecting on many of the retreats and conferences I have experienced, I feel the same tendency is often true of these educational experiences: scientists, professionals, and academics are treated as the “experts,” while lay people and practitioners are asked to listen. By contrast, the leadership team approached our retreat agenda with the intention of giving voice to the expertise and experiences of our attendees. The two sessions scheduled for the second day of the retreat were facilitated by the women farmers in attendance, rather than by outside “experts.” The first session’s topic was “Working with People as Well as Vegetables: Interns, Apprentices, & Personnel,” a topic mentioned by a few interviewees as a subject of interest given the prevalence of young interns on many of the farms in our region. This session was very successful, particularly because one of the women farmers had participated in a webinar on the topic of internships and their legality. Two of the leadership team members facilitated the session, which meandered from the topics of personnel, wages, and recruitment to conversations

about the role of existing organizations like Homegrown and WMGC. Since this session of the retreat did not involve any formal “presentation” and was structured entirely as a discussion, women had the opportunity to hear what a variety of internship programs look like on farms in the region. In attendance were two apprentices who were able to speak to interns’ expectations of educational experiences on farms and to strategies for communicating with farmers that seemed to work well. Nearly all of the women in attendance had been apprentices at some point in the past and many coordinate mentorship or training programs on their farms currently. Because interns are paid so little for their work, the topic of compensation came up and some insightful discussion around the sustainability of internships ensued.

The second session of the day explored the future of the network and its leadership. Participants reflected on what they had enjoyed most about the retreat and its structure, location, and activities, giving consideration to what they might like to see repeated next year. Suggestions and feedback varied tremendously, as some women felt having more technical-themed presentations was desirable, while others emphasized their interest simply in meeting and socializing with other women farmers. Several women voiced an interest in hearing a greater number of presentations from outside professionals or farmers in a more formal “instruction” setting. As I learned from the interviews, several of the women who expressed a lack of interest in skills workshops focused on use of tractors, tractor maintenance, carpentry, and other “men’s tasks” explained that their lack of interest comes from having a farm partner who is already responsible for those jobs. In general, the women who were most excited about skills workshops were women who are

farming solo or who do not otherwise have access to someone with mechanical and carpentry skills. Interestingly, another topic to arise during our conversation about the future of a network came from a farmer who farms in partnership with another woman. She mentioned that she felt like she was “cheating” by bringing her partner to the retreat. She acknowledged that she and her partner divide many of the farm tasks so that one is responsible for much of the mechanized work while the other does more of the hand work and is more knowledgeable about plants. But since both women were present at the meeting, it provided an interesting opportunity to discuss gender roles and the gendered division of farm labor in a different context. Both women were happy that they attended the retreat and agreed that the conversations were relevant and interesting, but their comments bring awareness to the diverse experiences of women farmers and the various manifestations of the gender binary. Our discussion of the future of the network brought into relief the importance of including a variety of activities and resources in next year’s retreat agenda and for allowing abundant time to learn about each other’s farms.

### **Reflections on the Retreat**

Powerful decisions and realizations emerge from the simple act of gathering people together to share their experiences. Going into a two-day gathering of women farmers, I knew that quality interactions and sharing of experiences and stories would be the minimum I could expect from the group. Of course, I expected more than just socializing; the leadership team and I planned the event so that learning, challenging conversation and inspiration might also result. Women farmer networks have the potential to provide support to their members, share new skills, and bring greater awareness to the challenges

and benefits of being a woman practicing agriculture. I approached the retreat as an opportunity to test some of those possibilities and to see, with women actually gathered together and hearing from one another, what might resonate with women in western Montana.

A major success of the gathering was that it brought women from geographically diverse communities around western Montana, a goal not currently being tackled by Homegrown or the WMGC but that I heard was needed by numerous interviewees. Despite the weather, women from the Flathead, Bitterroot, Missoula, and Mission valleys made the drive and I believe the event was more successful because of the geographic diversity represented by the group. It was rewarding to hear, on several occasions, women expressing their excitement at seeing each other when it had been a long time since their last encounter.

Another success of the retreat was the ease of conversation, even when it turned to somewhat more sensitive topics such as the distribution and marketing scope of the WMGC or the relevance of feminism for today's generations. Farmers from the Flathead do not currently have access to WMGC membership, though it sometimes distributes and markets produce to retail outlets within these farmers' communities. As was reflected in my interviews with some farmers, this creates a bit of tension among non-member farmers and the WMGC. At the end of the session that was focused on interns and personnel, the conversation turned to the WMGC and its structure but did not become heated or negative in any way. Similarly, the session on personnel management and internships was very productive and informative. We began the conversation by asking each participant to

share the structure of her current internship/apprenticeship program or, if she does not have interns, what her own internship experience was like. As the discussion moved forward, we uncovered a variety of challenges and approaches to improving education on farms. A major challenge that the group discussed at length is that internships and apprenticeships, when the wages are merely a “stipend” and are not meeting minimum wage, are actually illegal. The group engaged in an hour and forty minutes of conversation solely dedicated to the issues of fairly compensating interns, finding legal solutions, including room and board as compensation, and internship structures that meet farmers’ and interns’ expectations. Finally, the conversations to arise from my presentation of research themes and from an article that one participant brought to the retreat to inspire discussion illustrate fascinating differences of opinion around the term “feminism” and on-farm gender roles. The group discussed the need for social support for women farmers, mechanical skills trainings, and the difference between farming solo and in partnership. One farmer described how interns on her farm, both male and female, arrive with minimal hands-on farm skills and that, when offered instruction, female interns are much more intimidated by learning to drive the tractor or learn basic carpentry. A number of women shared similar examples, demonstrating the potential value farmers receive from hearing each others’ stories and reflections and sharing solutions in an open forum.

I always find it surprising the extent to which an event’s outcomes depend on its attendees and their contributions to the gathering. One of the challenges that I have faced in conducting this research and discussing topics of gender with women farmers is how to treat data coming from lesbian women farmers as I am coding and describing the data. I

was excited when I heard from two women I mentioned in the last chapter who are partners and farm together. To my surprise, this farmer reflected that she and her partner actually have a similar division of labor as many of the women in the room who farm in partnership with men. This relationship was something that had appeared in her interview (and that of her partner), but that the group had not discussed and I had not attempted to address in my short presentation. It was the perfect opportunity for me to confirm my interpretation of some of her interview remarks and for the group to hear how other women farmers in same-sex relationships grapple with similar issues of gender roles, socialization, and on-farm responsibilities.

When asked to offer feedback about the retreat, the group seemed most enthusiastic about keeping the gathering to a relatively casual, relaxation and social event. Aside from appreciating the company of other women farmers, opinions regarding retreat content and structure varied greatly. Some women felt more structured, facilitated sessions on specific topics was useful; others wanted loose social time and were ambivalent about educational sessions. Some women really appreciated the massages, hot springs, and “self-care” elements of the retreat; others said that these did not factor into their decision to come and would likely not matter in the future. In general, everyone agreed that the overnight format worked well and that Hot Springs was a great central location. Several farmers liked the idea of creating a women farmer listserv or Facebook page for promoting communication and information sharing between meetings. From a facilitator’s perspective, seeing how engaged the women were during informational sessions, I think

increasing the amount of structured presentation time would be useful, particularly for initiating constructive conversation among attendees.

On a more personal note, I was happy with my ability to coordinate all of the logistics and the content of the retreat with minimal guidance and support from the leadership team. The food, accommodations, and meeting space all worked out well and served the purpose of the retreat. Alameda's kitchen is not ideal for hosting group events, but we made it work. My job as a "facilitator" was made easy by the attendees, as they were all respectful of each other and there were no participants who tended to dominate the conversation (including me). In an earlier conversation with my advisor, she suggested that I ask some of the leadership to facilitate sessions or to take on a leadership role in some tangible way during the retreat. This turned out to be excellent advice. The leadership team members were attentive and respectful facilitators and the group appreciated hearing from their peers. Additionally, nearly all of the retreat attendees offered to support me in some way during the retreat by helping with food preparation, running errands, or leading discussion. They were insistent that I too enjoy a massage (which I did not have time to do), a kind gesture that I feel demonstrates the warm, supportive, and relaxed environment we created at this gathering.

### **Looking Forward**

Moving into the spring, the leadership team felt the retreat was successful and that a similar event should be coordinated next winter. Participants' contact information has been shared widely so that the three women leaders this year (plus the new recruit from the retreat) can begin planning next fall. Retreat attendees and research participants

were reluctant to try and organize any network gatherings or trainings this spring or summer, as schedules fill quickly and farm duties are already beginning. Given the positive feedback from retreat attendees, the number of women who registered for the retreat but who were unable to join because of road conditions, and the number of women who expressed interest in their interviews but who were unable to make the retreat for scheduling reasons, I am confident that a network event of some sort will take place in the fall of 2014 or winter 2015. I anticipate more frequent gatherings and greater interest in skills workshops over time as women farmers in western Montana become more familiar with the resources and opportunities a network could provide. Based on apparent enthusiasm for having women from all over western Montana at the retreat, this seems like a critical goal for future events. As of spring 2014, western Montana's women farmer network will remain an informal network of women practicing sustainable agriculture and will hopefully include an annual retreat for women all over the region.

As I conducted these interviews with women farmers and asked questions to gauge their interest in a farmer network, it occurred to me that the potential value of a network and women-only space may not be entirely obvious to them. In other words, I may have heard different reflections from women regarding the value of a network if I had interviewed some of them *after* the retreat. Being asked the "potential" value of something you have not really experienced can be complicated; perhaps women farmers will be able to speak more thoroughly to the value of a network once it fully materializes in our region. In the meantime, this study offers some valuable insights about the existing relationships between women farmers in western Montana, some of the shared experiences of women

farmers practicing sustainable agriculture, and ideas for potential network offerings. In collecting some of the views and experiences of women farmers in western Montana, women leaders in our agricultural community are poised to more effectively offer resources to women farmers that are meaningful and relevant.

## CHAPTER 6: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Many of the reflections on gender and farming from the women in this study as well as my own reiterate a number of themes that arise in literature on women in agriculture. Several participants expressed frustration at not being taken seriously as farmers and that this has limited their farm education or, in some cases, has made them feel de-valued in public spaces. Farmers in Trauger's (2004), Hassanein's (1999), and Barbercheck's (2009) research echo these sentiments, indicating that, though perceptions of "what makes a farmer" are shifting, plenty of women farmers still feel marginalized or overlooked because they choose to engage in what has traditionally been considered men's work. From women in Hassanein's network research and personal accounts found on network websites, women farmer networks have been successful in validating women's roles in agriculture and providing support and resources to women. Though many of the women I have met with over the last two years feel somewhat connected to other women farmers, there is still plenty of potential to formalize a network. Aside from affirming the work done by its members, a women farmer network can raise awareness of women's roles in agriculture by conducting outreach and education to the broader community. In this way, I think there is plenty of need and space for a women farmer network in western Montana.

My original research question from spring 2012, "Why are so many women in western Montana choosing to farm?" was clearly answered by the women I interviewed. Many of the women practicing sustainable agriculture in western Montana are farming because it is a livelihood that allows them to live their values and produce a healthy, tangible product for their families and wider communities. They are committed to the

physically demanding and sometimes overwhelming work of farming because they find the experience of successfully producing food and overcoming challenges to be enormously rewarding. For some women, the need to acquire traditionally male farm skills adds to farming's potential to be an empowering vocation, as does the need to be both a physical laborer and a savvy entrepreneur. That farming is such demanding work and that so many interviewees expressed similar rewards and feelings of empowerment speaks to the potential for a farmer network to provide a space for women to learn from and support one another.

Many of the women farmers I interviewed also see their love of food and of farming as a chance to inspire social change. Participants in this study feel satisfied knowing that they are offering an alternative to conventionally produced food and that they are making a tangible, quantifiable contribution to the alternative food movement. Women also indicate an interest in having a farmer network, should it more fully develop, serve as a vehicle for activism for its members. It seems to me that these themes complement each other and that a women farmer network could engage its members in more structured outreach around women in farming and food production as a form of activism.

Additionally, farm network activities could include some of the skills-based workshops that women in western Montana and in the literature (Hassanein 1999) express would be valuable to them.

Finally, the value of mentorship, both formal and informal, constitutes an important theme to highlight from this project. Many of the women I interviewed have worked for each other and continue to learn from each other. Some women believe that

opportunities for socializing among farmers help limit feelings of competition among growers. Women who have been farming for many years express less of a need for a supportive network of women but are very supportive of mentorship opportunities and acknowledge the value of teaching the next generation of producers. All of these factors, when woven together, seem to articulate a clear role for a women farmer network. More experienced women farmers might engage in the role of “mentor” to younger beginning farmers, a process that might discourage competition simply by building cooperative intergenerational relationships. Again, Hassanein’s observations of farmer network benefits confirm that women farmer networks can play this sort of role for their members.

Regardless of what form a women farmer network takes, as one farmer noted, “Bringing women farmers together to hear each other’s stories and learn from each other can’t be a bad thing!” Food systems work around the world is taking on many forms and is addressing the challenge of resilience in a multitude of ways. Land conservation efforts, farm-to-cafeteria initiatives, marketing and business strategy workshops for farmers, Think Local First campaigns, the spread of farmers’ markets, and the emergence of incubator farms are just a few of the ways the alternative food movement has materialized. Farmer networks are another strategy for changing the dominant narratives within our food system, specifically the perception that farmers are white males on combines in the Midwest. Regional and local food systems are much more diverse than that image would have us believe and women are playing major roles in emerging local food systems as farmers, consumers, and advocates. Women farmers practicing an alternative agriculture in western Montana have many resources at their disposal to help

their businesses succeed, but the work of challenging gender stereotypes and therefore giving women credit for the work they do is not yet finished. Perhaps, as bumper stickers around western Montana that read “Know Your Farmer” become increasingly popular, the recognition that many of our farmers are women will also become commonplace. Maybe, someday, the assumption will be that “Old MacDonald” is actually a woman.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guide

Thank you for your willingness to be interviewed! I really appreciate you taking time out of your schedule to talk with me.

The reason I wanted to talk with you today is that I am very interested to hear anything you have to say about your experience as a woman who is practicing sustainable agriculture. On a related note, I am also trying to gauge the interest of women farmers in our region in establishing a women farmer network for western Montana. There will be a few questions that focus on this specifically later in our conversation.

Before we get started, I want to let you know that your identity as a participant in this study will remain confidential. Your name (and the names of other participants) will not be used in any presentations or written reports. Also, there is the possibility of a women farmer retreat in January and I will likely present some of my research to the women who attend, so stay tuned for that.

If it is okay with you, I would like to record the interview. Taping ensures that your views are accurately recorded, and it allows me to focus on what you're saying. Is that OK with you?

History and Background in Farming... Let's begin by talking a little about how you got into farming.

1. How did you first get into it?

PROBE: How long have you been farming?

PROBE: Any "formal" agriculture education?

PROBE: Internship/apprenticeship?

2. Have there been any women farmer mentors along the way?

Your current farm operation...Transitioning to the present, I'd like to hear about your current farming operation.

3. When did you get started? How do you describe your farm? Tell me about it.

PROBE: Primary crops?

4. Is farming your primary occupation? If not, what work do you do off the farm?

5. Would you describe yourself as the primary farmer of this farm? Is anyone else actively involved in your farming operation? If so, who?

Potential for a Network...Okay, now I want to switch gears a little. Over the last year there have been a few meetings of women farmers who are interested in a women farmer network. Part of the purpose of my research, as I mentioned, is to identify the potential for a network, gauge women's interest, and see what organizations are already connecting farmers around western MT. So let's talk for a bit about what communication you currently have with other growers in our region.

6. Do you communicate much with other farmers in our region?

PROBE: If so, with whom?

PROBE: What sort of information do you share with each other?

7. Are you a member of the Western Montana Growers' Cooperative?

Member of Homegrown?

Member of AERO?

MT Organic Association?

Of the organizations you belong to, which would you say you're MOST active in now?

8. What are some of the major benefits you receive through your involvement in these organizations?

9. Are there additional resources or opportunities for farmers in western Montana that you feel are needed?

PROBE: Educational, extension resources?

PROBE: Social opportunities?

10. Do you think having a women-only farmer/rancher space to discuss sustainable agriculture and farming would be valuable? Why or why not?

11. Do you feel connected with other women farmers in our region? Can you tell me more about that?

12. As you may already know, there have been some recent efforts and interest around starting a women farmer network in western Montana. Is that something that might interest you? That you would potentially want to participate in? Why or why not?

IF YES:

13. What sorts of resources, activities, or opportunities might you want to see offered through a women farmer network?

14. How often do you think a women's network should meet? During what times of the year would you be most available?

Views on the work you do...Now that I know a little more about your farm, I'd like to learn more about what it's like for you to be a woman farmer in Montana.

15. What would you say are the most rewarding components of farming for you?

16. What are the most challenging parts?

17. Has being a woman farmer ever presented a problem for you? If so, how?

18. As a farmer, has the fact that you're a woman ever been a benefit in any way?

19. Do you consider yourself a feminist? How do you define "feminism?"

20. In what ways might the work you're doing as a farmer contribute to the empowerment of women?

Well, we're pretty much done with my questions at this point. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you think relates to what we've been discussing? Anything you've been reflecting on that doesn't necessarily fall into one of the questions I've asked you?

Questions for me?

**APPENDIX B**  
**Participant Marketing Strategies**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Farm Size &amp; Components</b>                                     | <b>Org Membership</b>            | <b>Marketing Strategies</b>                                       |
|--------------------|---|----------------------------------|---|
| 1                  | 5 acres   | Homegrown                        | Farmers' market<br>Direct to retailers                            |
| 2                  | 8 acres   | Homegrown<br>WMGC                | WMGC<br>Farmers' markets<br>Direct to retailers                   |
| 3                  | 40 acres in hay, 3-4 in veggies                                       | WMGC                             | Farmers' markets<br>WMGC<br>Direct to retailers                   |
| 4                  | Lease 30 acres; 5 acres in veggies, others are oilseed or other grain | WMGC<br>MOA                      | WMGC<br>Farmers' markets<br>On-farm winter CSA                    |
| 5                  | 3 acres   | Homegrown<br>WMGC                | WMGC<br>Farmers' markets<br>CSA                                   |
| 6                  | 3 acres   | Homegrown<br>WMGC                | WMGC<br>Farmers' markets<br>CSA                                   |
| 7                  | 15 acres pasture, ½ acre in veggies, 300-400 laying hens              | WMGC<br>Homegrown<br>AERO        | WMGC<br>Direct to retailers                                       |
| 8                  | 2 acres, veggies, sheep, chickens                                     | Homegrown                        | Farmers' markets<br>CSA   |
| 9                  | Veggies, seeds, flowers, greenhouse for seeds 18 acres, 8 cultivated  | MOA<br>AERO                      | Seeds<br>Farmers' markets<br>Direct to retailers                  |
| 10                 | Mixed Veggies on 4 acres, chickens                                    | AERO                             | CSA<br>Farmers' markets<br>On-farm dinners<br>Direct to retailers |
| 11                 | Mixed veggies, goat, 1 acre   | N/A                              | CSA<br>Direct to retailers<br>Farmers' markets                    |
| 12                 | 7 acres, mixed veggies  | AERO                             | CSA<br>Farmers' markets<br>Direct to retailers                    |
| 13                 | 40 acres total, 8 in row crops, sheep, hay                            | AERO<br>Homegrown<br>WMGC        | WMGC<br>Farmers' markets  |
| 14                 | 70 acres, 5 in row crops, beef, hay                                   | WMGC<br>Homegrown<br>AERO<br>MOA | WMGC<br>Seed garlic<br>Farmers' markets                           |
| 15                 | 1 acre, mixed veggies, chickens                                       | Homegrown<br>WMGC                | WMGC<br>Farmers' markets  |

|    |                          |                           |                                       |
|----|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 16 | 2 acres mixed veggies    | AERO<br>WMGC<br>Homegrown | Direct to neighborhood<br>CSA<br>WMGC |
| 17 | 3.5 acres, mixed veggies | Homegrown<br>WMGC         | WMGC<br>Direct to retailers           |
| 18 | 4 acres                  | Homegrown<br>AERO         | Farm stand<br>WMGC, CSA               |

## APPENDIX C

### Women in Hot Water!

Women Farmers in Western Montana  
Sunday, February, 23 – Monday, February 24, 2014  
Alameda's Hot Springs Retreat  
Hot Springs, MT

#### RETREAT AGENDA

##### SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23:

Noon – 12:30: Arrival, room assignments, snacks

12:30 – 12:50: WELCOME & Announcements (Dining Room)

12:50 – 2:15pm: INTRODUCTIONS (Dining Room)

2:15pm – 3:45pm: **SESSION 1** (Dome or Dining Room)

##### ***Taking Care of the Farmer's Body***

Antara Quinones, Physical Therapist @ Alpine Physical Therapy

3:45 – 5pm: **PLAY TIME!** A great time to soak or get a massage or...?

5pm – 6:15pm: **SESSION 2** (Dining Room)

##### ***Multifunctional Agriculture & Care Farming***

Maarten Fischer

*Maarten is a Dutch Native who moved to the US and Montana in the spring of 2012. He currently lives in the Flathead with his wife and two kids. Maarten has a Masters degree from the University of Amsterdam in Operations Research and Econometrics. While traveling and farming in his early years, he became interested in the community aspect of farming and ranching. After a short career in the world of process auditing, he decided to devote his time to working on business models for farms as community based enterprises that can increase their profitability by combining traditional farming and ranching with visitor oriented services: Multifunctional Agriculture.*

*In Montana, Maarten is working with local partners to develop and teach an entrepreneurship course in the field of Multifunctional Agriculture at Flathead Valley Community College; after the pilot, the course will be made available to organizations throughout Montana. Maarten is also working with A Plus Health Care to develop day programs in the field of care prevention and wellness. These programs will promote independent living and aim to empower clients with a wide range of disabilities to actively take part in society and reduce their reliance on care. In these programs, elements of so called care farms are being adapted to the Montana health care system.*

6:15pm – 7:15pm: **SESSION 3**

**Conversations with Women Farmers, Thesis Presentation**

Eva Rocke, UM Environmental Studies Program

7:15pm – 8:30pm: **DINNER**

No structured retreat time after dinner!

**MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24:**

7:15am – 8:15am: **YOGA** with Brianna Ewert! (Dome)

8:30 – 9:15am: **BREAKFAST** (Dining Room)

9:15am – 10:15am: **SESSION 3** (Dining Room)

***Working with People as Well as Vegetables: Interns, Apprentices, & Personnel***

Cori Ash, Pam Gerwe, & Laura Garber

10:30 – 11:30: **SESSION 4** (Dining Room)

***What Can a Women Farmer Network Look Like?: A Discussion of the Future!***

Eva & Leadership Team

11:30 – 1pm: **PLAY TIME** (another opportunity for hot springs, massage, exercise, social time)

\*\*Please make sure to have your rooms empty by noon so that the cleaning staff can do their jobs!

1pm – 2:15pm: **SESSION 5**

***Technical Knowledge Roundtable: Bring your questions and help a farmer friend!***

Leadership team

2:15pm – 2:45pm: **EVALUATIONS & GOODBYES**