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## Dairy Farm Women's Information Seeking Patterns Involvement in Farm Decision Making

### Abstract

Farm women have expressed strong needs for more and better educational and informational programs. Recent research suggests that farm women are playing an active role in information seeking and farm decision making.

# **Dairy Farm Women's Information Seeking Patterns & Involvement in Farm Decision Making**

**Jean O'Brien**

Farm women have expressed strong needs for more and better educational and informational programs. Recent research suggests that farm women are playing an active role in information seeking and farm decision making. To establish a basis for developing new informational and educational programs, this study attempts to determine current information channels and sources that dairy farm women use for decision making. It also attempts to determine specific informational and educational needs of women farm managers.

Although dairy farm women have been included in several farm women studies, there has never been a specific study of dairy farm women. This is an important population to examine because the total family contribution to the farm enterprise is greater for dairy than for nondairy farms.

## **The Study**

An analysis was conducted during 1982 to address these questions:

- How involved are dairy farm women in farm decision making?
- How involved are dairy farm women in information seeking for farm decisions?
- What are the most important information sources dairy farm women use to make decisions?
- What are specific informational and educational needs of women farm managers?

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## **Methodology**

The sample in this study was dairy farm wives who were members of either a dairy cattle breeding cooperative (Tri-State Breeders), or a dairy marketing cooperative (Associated Milk Producers Incorporated). Questionnaires were completed by 72 women who attended Tri-State Dairy School for Farm Women and 89 women who attended the Mid-States regional meeting of AMPI. When incomplete surveys were eliminated, the final data base included 115 women.

The women who attended these meetings were generally assumed to be more actively involved in farming than those who did not attend. There was a conscious effort to reach active farm women to determine their decision making and information seeking patterns. It was assumed these women would give more specific data regarding active dairy farm women's information sources for decisions.

When compared to averages reported in the U.S. Census of Agriculture and Wisconsin Dairy Facts, farms represented by respondents showed more acreage per farm, larger herd size and higher milk production. Farms represented in the sample averaged 401 acres with a dairy herd of 62 cows and annual milk production of 15,777 pounds. Wisconsin averages in 1981 were 201 farm acres, 36 cows, and 12,185 pounds of milk.

The farm women completed a survey requiring them to answer questions about four decision making topics and information seeking in dairy farming: farm management, dairy production, farm purchases, and crop production. They were also required to list the information or training needed to be a more effective farm manager.

## **Findings**

### **Dairy Farm Women's Involvement in Decision Making**

Survey results showed that dairy farm women were most involved in farm management decisions, followed by dairy production decisions. Their involvement in farm purchase decision making was significantly lower than farm management and dairy production decision making. Crop production decision involvement was significantly lower than all other areas.

Farm women were most involved in farm management decisions of record keeping, estate planning, purchasing land, borrowing money, using computers, and determining long range goals and objectives.

Decisions falling in the middle range were the dairy production and farm purchase decisions. In dairy production decision making, women decided how many cows to milk, which feed to use for calves and which sires to select for breeding cows. The women's relatively high involvement in dairy production questions could be easily expected, as the survey respondents attended dairy production training meetings.

### **Dairy Farm Women's Involvement in Information Seeking**

As found in the decision making data, farm women are most involved in seeking information for farm management issues, followed by dairy production issues. Their involvement in farm purchase information seeking was significantly lower than in farm management or dairy production.

Farm women are highly involved in seeking information for farm management decisions such as the farm estate plan, farm record keeping system, long range farm goals and objectives, borrowing money and purchasing additional land.

Women were least involved in decision making and information seeking for crop production issues of soil conservation practices, crop rotation, fertilizer use, seed variety purchase and pesticide use.

Information seeking topics in the middle range were the dairy production and farm purchase issues. The second highest information seeking involvement areas were the dairy topics of herd size, calf feed and sire selection.

Farm purchase issues again comprised the third category. The women were not highly involved in land rental or equipment purchase. However, they were highly involved in seeking information for land purchase and uninvolved in seed variety information seeking as shown in crop production. Again, women seemed to be more involved in seeking information for a particular kind of purchase.

## **Dairy Farm Women's Information Sources for Decision**

In the survey, women were asked to report the three most important information sources used for each decision situation. The descriptive analysis gives equal weight to information sources mentioned first, second and third for each specific decision.

The survey shows that farm women use government agency personnel and community professionals most often as information sources for farm management decisions. A further breakdown in the frequency data indicates that record keeping information sources include county extension agents and vocational technical farm instructors.

However, community professionals played a more important role as information sources for estate planning, with the attorney and banker listed most frequently. Women use the county extension agent as well as the attorney and the banker to develop farm goals and objectives. The banker was listed most often as an information source for borrowing money. Women found out about computers through the Dairy Herd Improvement Association (DHIA) and Agricultural Records Cooperative (ARC).

## **Dairy Production Decisions**

The second most important area that women seek information for decision making is in dairy production. Women most often use practical considerations and agribusiness personnel as information sources. The frequency data shows that women consider their farm facilities, and consult their husbands and bankers in determining herd size. A variety of government agency sources are used for feed decisions. These include vocational technical farm instructors, county extension agents, university specialists, university research, extension bulletins and university credit courses. The feed dealer is also influential in feed decisions. Animal breeder cooperatives and the artificial insemination technicians are important sources of information for selecting sires.

Women use many sources of information for farm purchase decisions. The banker is consulted most often for purchasing land. However, women confer with their husbands, fathers, sons, in-laws, brothers and neighbors for land rental decisions.

The seed dealer provides information for seed variety purchases and the implement dealer is important in purchasing equipment.

Women use several different sources of information for making crops decisions. Government agencies such as the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) and county extension agents provide information for conservation practices. Magazine articles are also listed as sources. Crop rotation plans provide information for both pesticides and fertilizers. .

### Dairy Farm Women's Informational and Educational Needs

Women responded to an open-ended question that asked, "What type of information or training do you feel you need to be a more effective farm manager?" The responses were categorized into these major headings, "production," "farm management," and "interpersonal skills."

TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGES OF DAIRY FARM WOMEN'S  
INFORMATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Type of Decision	First Response	Second Response	Total
Production	12.3%	47.1%	59.4%
Farm Management	52.3%	11.8%	64.1%
Interpersonal	6.2%	11.8%	18.0%

Table 1 shows the frequency percentages of the first responses of the women, indicating their informational needs in farm management topics rating highest at 52.3%. This compares with the decision making findings, indicating that women were most involved in farm management decisions.

A further breakdown in farm management needs shows that record keeping and accounting, marketing, business management and income tax information were the most important informational needs.

Some women interpreted the question as the vehicle for information rather than the subject of information. This gives interesting results, showing their preference for university extension training and vocational technical farm classes.

## Recommendations

Agricultural agency personnel, particularly county extension agents and vocational technical farm instructors, should design specific programs to fulfill particular informational and educational needs of farm women.

These programs should deal with farm management, production, and interpersonal topics. Farm management topics should include record keeping and accounting, marketing, business management and income tax preparation.

The production programs should include information about fertilizers, feeds and nutrition, artificial insemination, seeds, chemicals and machinery maintenance.

In addition, agricultural agencies could provide training for some interpersonal needs of women, such as understanding and appreciation of farm life for urban background women, assertiveness training and dealing with people.

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