

Wisconsin Women in Conservation: Duo of female history makers to headline Wisconsin Women in Conservation's inaugural Educator Conference on April 28 in Stevens Point

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Chippewa Falls, WI – Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC) is proud to celebrate Women's History Month by announcing that pioneering researchers Jean Eells and Rebecca Christoffel will headline the upcoming WiWiC Educator Network Conference on April 28 in Stevens Point. The conference theme is "Lighting the Fire with Women Landowners" and the day-long, non-traditional event will run from 9:30am to 3:30pm in the Sentry World Atrium. Space is limited and registration is open now at WiWiC.org under Events.

What IS the key ingredient to supporting Wisconsin women who want to learn how to best steward their land? According to research done by Eells and Christoffel for over two decades, the answer is conservation educators who understand and use educational strategies and outreach that work best for women. Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC), a national leader in women-focused conservation education, is hosting this first-of-its-kind gathering to bring together conservation educators from across the state to learn about these best practices to support the increasingly powerful and growing demographic of women landowners. Women are now 35% of the primary operators on Wisconsin's farmland. 22% of the women in this group have been farming for ten years or less.

“I feel it’s so important to learn to work with women landowners on conservation because women own or co-own almost half of the agricultural land in the USA, including Wisconsin. In addition, women generally view their land as community rather than commodity and are interested in learning how all of the pieces fit together. This mindset is a natural fit for ecology and conservation,” says Dr. Rebecca Christoffel. “This is an important, long under-served audience in conservation.”

Dr. Rebecca Christoffel holds B.S. and M.S. degrees from UW-Madison in Wildlife Ecology and a Ph.D. from Michigan State University in Fisheries and Wildlife. Her work focuses on the human dimensions of natural resources management. Dr. Christoffel has served as the State Wildlife Extension Biologist and a faculty member at Iowa State University. Christoffel is now a researcher at E Resources Group, and is the primary evaluator on the WiWiC project. She and her husband steward 30 acres of prairie on the Wisconsin/Illinois border.

“At this conference we will introduce the Learning Circle model and how it works to support best practices in women landowner education, based on years of research in how women land stewards learn best,” explains Dr. Jean Eells. Eells is the founder of E Resources Group, and the leading researcher in this subject nationally. She facilitates the evaluation component of WiWiC. “Our research has shown that peer-based, interactive learning environments work extremely well to provide support for women to take action on conservation plans and vision for their land.”

Dr. Eells works from the prairie pothole region of north central Iowa, and partners closely with her tenant to care for the family farmland. She has operated E Resources Group, LLC since 1997 and led the movement to reach women farmland owners with conservation information across the nation after obtaining her Ph.D. in 2008 from Iowa State University. In 2021, Eells won Conservation Professional of the Year from the International Soil and Water Conservation Society, Conservationist of the Year from the National Professional Organization of Women in NRCS, and Iowa Woman Conservationist given by the Conservation Districts of Iowa and the NRCS Federal Women’s Program in Iowa.

“This whole conference will very intentionally reflect the interactive Learning Circle approach to women’s education, reflecting how our research shows that women best learn by interacting with each other,” adds Christoffel. “Anyone interested in this topic is welcome to come, whether you are a conservation volunteer or paid staff, to experience creating welcoming settings for women-focused education and

bring home new ideas for your work.”

“This upcoming gathering celebrates the growth of women in conservation in Wisconsin and provides tools for educators to amplify that even further,” said Dr. Esther Shekinah, WiWiC project lead at the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute. “We are honored to have over twenty conservation organizations partnering in this inaugural event. We started the WiWiC Educator Network to bring together all people in our state dedicated to conservation education for women and are thrilled to have this opportunity to meet and learn together in person.”

“What I think is really the biggest lesson that I’ve learned through the work I’ve done with Jean Eells is that if women are provided the information and resources they need, they are apt to take action on conservation. Greater than 50% of women will take some step in their conservation journey after having attended a single event,” says Christoffel. “This is an incredibly important audience for us to capture and cultivate. We satisfy the women landowners’ interest in stewarding their land and then they nurture the myriad natural resources that are found on these lands. I daresay we also cultivate more advocates for conservation including clean air, clean water, and reduced soil loss. Now who can argue with that?”

The WiWiC Educator Conference will also include opportunities for conservation educators to network, connect and mentor each other. The conference partner organizations will have resources available to further strengthen educator toolkits. All Wisconsin conservation educators, both men and women, who are interested in learning effective ways of working with women landowners are welcome, from agency staff to non-profit organizations and educators in volunteer roles. Conservationists early in their careers are encouraged to attend. Space is limited and the whole day session including lunch is \$25 until April 1 (\$35 after), thanks to support from NRCS Wisconsin and The Nature Conservancy. Scholarships are also available.

[WiWiC](#) is a state-wide collaborative effort led by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in partnership with Wisconsin Farmers Union, Renewing the Countryside and Marbleseed (formerly MOSES). A five-year multi-faceted project funded by the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), WiWiC brings together Wisconsin women landowners to connect and learn about conservation practices, resources, and funding opportunities.

In addition to Field Days, WiWiC also provides mentorship to women landowners

and farmers who want to increase conservation practices on their properties - and FREE professionally-prepared Conservation Plans. There will be a series of Spring Learning Circle gatherings across the state followed by Summer Field Days and a series of Fall Learning Circles. Interested parties can subscribe to “The Buzz” monthly newsletter and the “Queen Bee Sessions” podcast on the website as well.