forum

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Do Female Agents Make a Difference? Female agricultural agents are a relatively new phenomenon in Extension staffing whose impact has yet to be felt. They represent a small percentage of the county and area agricultural agents across the nation. Female agricultural agents have joined a program area that has been staffed almost exclusively by men for more than 60 years.

To develop a profile of this relatively new group of agricultural agents, data were obtained from the Extension Management Information System (EMIS) personnel subsystem.[1] The variables selected included: title, sex, primary responsibility, date of birth, appointment date, undergraduate degree, and graduate degree. The final list included female agricultural agents with county or area responsibilities and a minimum of 50.1% responsibilities in an agricultural subject-matter area.

According to the data in the EMIS personnel subsystem, there were 4,077[2] county and area agricultural agents in the United States, District of Coumbia, and territories. Of these, 45% of the county agricultural agents were in the Southern, 28% in the North Central, 15% in the Western, and 12% in the Northeast regions.

There are 147 female county and area agricultural agents in the 4 Extension regions. They constitute 3.6% of the county and area agricultural agents in the United States and territories. About 2% of the county agricultural agents in the Southern

Table 1. Number and percentage of total ag agents to female ag agents, by region.

Extension region	No of ag agents	Percentage	No. of female ag agents	Percentage of female ag agents
Southern	1,851	45%	40	2.2%
North Central	1,125	28	34	3.0
Western	633	15	26	4.1
Northeast	468	12	47	10.0
	4,077	100%	147	3.6%

region are females, 3% in the North Central, 4% in the Western, and 10% in the Northeast (see Table 1). Interestingly, the Northeast region has the smallest number of county agricultural agents, but the largest number of female agricultural agents.

The data also revealed that the typical female agricultural agent is 26-28 years of age, with 3 years or less experience, has an undergraduate degree in animal husbandry or horticulture and a graduate degree in horticulture or entomology, and is responsible for the subject-matter areas of turf, nursery, and ornamentals or general animal and crop production.

The trend of females assuming positions as agricultural agents will probably increase in the future. Part of this trend can be traced to high schools in which female enrollment in agricultural programs is increasing. In Maryland, during the 80-81 school year, 37% of the vocational agriculture enrollees were females. At the university level, a USDA report indicates that females represent 19% of agricultural students at 1890 institutions and Tuskegee Institute and 27% at 1862 institutions.[3]

While the impact of this new phenomenon in Extension staffing hasn't been documented, it raises several questions that Extension educators and administrators should consider. Will the increase in female agricultural agents increase the number of farm women participating in agricultural programs? Why are there more female agricultural agents in the Northeast region? What's the attitude of males toward female agricultural agents? Are female agricultural agents limited to certain subject-matter areas? Are agricultural programs and delivery methods changing? The answers to these questions and others should provide some insight into the significance of the female agricultural agent to the Extension Service.

Footnotes

1. Extension Management Information System, USDA, Washington, D.C., October 22, 1981.
2. Virginia not included in data.
3. *Strengthening 1890 Land-Grant Institutions* (Report to the U.S. Department of Agriculture by presidents of 1890 Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, March 11, 1980), p. 61.