



# The Young Farmers Newsletter

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A Growing Opportunities Initiative

## Holistic farm management shows great benefits

If there's a crisis in agriculture, you won't hear about it from Brenda Belbas. The 49-year-old cow-calf producer, and her husband Jim, credit holistic farm management (along with hard work and the invaluable assistance of their 81-year-old neighbour Dennis Brogden) with much of their operation's success and their optimistic view of the future.

Despite the trials of BSE and unreliable weather, their farm near Cartwright in southwestern Manitoba has managed to meet all the challenges of raising 152 head of cattle on six quarter sections over the past several years. And, there's nothing she'd rather do than raise cattle. "You are doing so many different things that it's always interesting," she says, adding that she loves the privacy of country life.

Brenda was raised on a farm and kept cows on her own for several years while she raised her family. She started out with 35 head, feeding some and leasing out the rest. Now in a second marriage, and with her children grown, Brenda is focused on building an operation that will allow her and her husband to keep farming well into their retirement years. Holistic farming goes a long way in helping them meet that goal.

The couple share on-farm chores. Both check and feed the cows, with the regular help of Dennis. Jim is the operation's main mechanic and handyman and works off-farm driving a school bus to supplement the family income. Brenda, who is the main calf deliverer, also drives a school bus on occasion, and is responsible for the farm's finances.

Over the years, Brenda has used strategic borrowing through the Manitoba Agricultural Credit Corporation (now Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation – MASC) to expand operations and now she and her husband participate in a holistic management group that has helped them enhance their business. They focus on keeping costs low, management intensity high and labour requirements at a minimum.

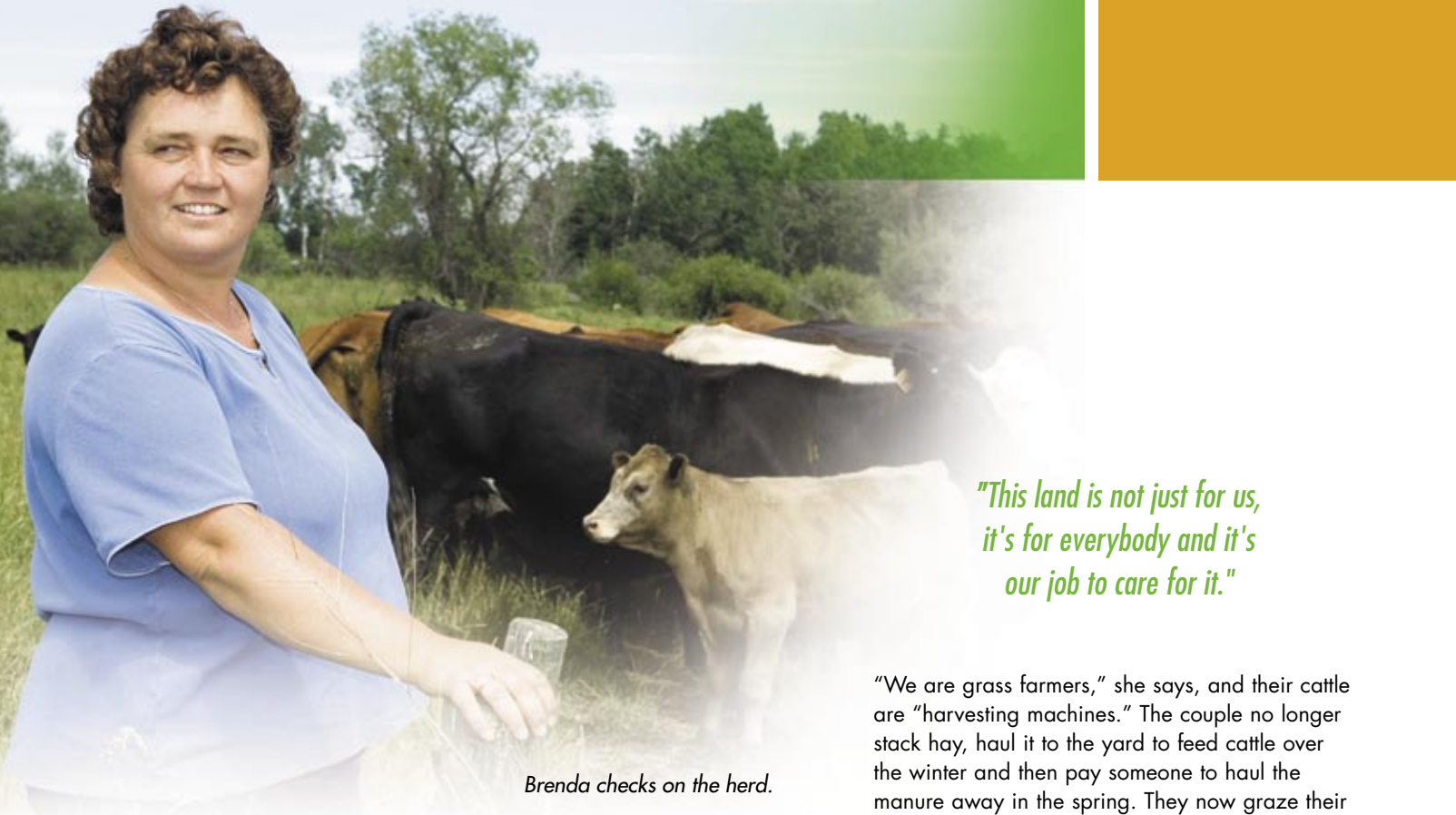
Brenda has turned to MASC four times in her farming career for land and operating loans which have helped keep operations afloat. Holistic farm management is mainly responsible for her optimistic outlook, although she admits having doubts when first asked to join a group, wondering what it was all about.

*continued on page 2...*

*"You are doing so many different things that it's always interesting."*



*Brenda and Jim with their grass "harvesting machines", their cattle.*



*"This land is not just for us,  
it's for everybody and it's  
our job to care for it."*

*Brenda checks on the herd.*

Over the past quarter century, holistic management programs have been gaining popularity across the Prairies. The programs connect a dozen or so farm couples through a course held over several weeks. Each family establishes priorities, not only for the financial and ecological evolution of their farms, but also for their personal lives. The couples continue to meet regularly to support shared values and trade information.

"It's been phenomenal," Brenda says. "It's about how to improve your personal life. Don't just think about work, work, work...and the leftover time is for you. You are supposed to plan for some time for yourself."

Brenda had no difficulties buying into the holistic program's stewardship ethic. "This land is not just for us, it's for everybody and it's our job to care for it," she explains, but is clear that all the producers are realistically focused on making a profit at the same time.

Brenda's holistic management group was the impetus for she and her husband's involvement in the local grazing club, where Brenda picked up strategies that have paid off – not only by reducing production costs, but labour as well.

"We are grass farmers," she says, and their cattle are "harvesting machines." The couple no longer stack hay, haul it to the yard to feed cattle over the winter and then pay someone to haul the manure away in the spring. They now graze their cows in the summer, and winter them in the pastures by bale grazing. This method disperses the cattle and the manure over the land base – cutting the cost of manure management, fuel and fertilizer.

Wintering the cattle in the pastures instead of a feed yard has produced healthy cows, reduced disease and the need for vaccinations. The couple have intensified their summer grazing program, and are shifting their calving season from early to late March, to reduce the risk of losing calves to hypothermia.

Brenda says she's had "lots of advice over the years and advice has to be taken with a grain of salt because it's not necessarily for you." She advises women to take in all the information they can "and then decide what's right for you."

Nonetheless, she's happy to share what she's learned with other farm women. And her tips include: "It's easier to have sheep instead of cattle, if you are on your own; they're easier to birth. "And if you have cows, choose quiet ones. If you end up with an aggressive one, get rid of it."

Mainly, Brenda advises that farmers should stick with what they do best. Her benchmark for successful herd management is: if it works for her cows, then it works for her. And holistic farming is working for both.

# Take the Small Farms Challenge

To build community and get people thinking about how to generate new opportunities for rural people and farmers, Turtle Mountain Community Development Corporation's Agriculture Committee has launched The Small Farms Challenge. It is open to people of all ages from anywhere in Canada: students of all ages; urbanites who grew up on farms or who may just dream of becoming farmers; large farmers who want to downsize gracefully; entrepreneurial folk; retired people; etc.

Participants must submit a business proposal for a viable small farm operation, and the best proposals will receive a prize – \$5,000 in cash shared by five winners, plus an all expense weekend in Boissevain during the 2007 Small Farms Conference.

In January 2004, Turtle Mountain CDC's Agriculture Committee released the book *Small Farms*. It profiled 20 small farms in southwest Manitoba, all demonstrating that it is still possible to have a sustainable small farm operation in this day and age. The book encourages other rural communities to evaluate their quality of life, the availability of products and services in their communities, as well as such elements as infrastructure, community spirit and their viability and sustainability.

The Turtle Mountain CDC strongly believes we still need to build more community in rural areas, not just among farmers, but also between farmers and urban residents. The benefit of community is often missing from global agriculture. To that end, it is sponsoring this challenge.

For more information, see below.

*Information provided by Cathey Day,  
Rural Leadership Specialist, Boissevain*

Take the...

## SMALL FARMS CHALLENGE

— your big opportunity to dream SMALL!

Can you picture an ideal rural life: children exploring the woods, families working together, making ends meet and more?

Would you like to promote the success of smaller scale farms and viable rural businesses?

Put your plan on paper and: contribute to a renewed vision, possibly win wonderful prizes, meet like-minded people and maybe, just maybe, nurture your own dream come true.

Submit a plan covering land, people, energy, business and marketing.

**DEADLINE:** November 1, 2006.

**PRIZES:** \$5,000.00 in cash shared by 5 winners plus an all expense weekend in Boissevain during the Small Farms Conference

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:**

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## CHANGES IN FARM WORK OVER PAST 20 YEARS

The contributions of Canadian farm women have increased and diversified dramatically over the past 20 years. A study at the Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment at St. Peter's College in Muenster, Saskatchewan compared the change in women's farming roles from 1982 to 2002. The study, done for the National Farmers' Union, was published as *The Canadian Farm Family at Work: Exploring Gender and Generation (2003)*.

### FARM TASKS PERFORMED REGULARLY BY FARM WOMEN

	1982	2002
Ploughing, Cultivating, Planting	9%	18%
Application of fertilizers or pesticides	4%	8%
Performance of field work without machinery	8%	16%
Drive Trucks	28%	54%
Harvest without machinery	7%	9%
Harvest with machinery	21%	36%
Care of farm animals	27%	56%
Milking chores	18%	15%
Farm Errands	16%	85%

### FARM MANAGEMENT TASKS PERFORMED REGULARLY BY WOMEN

	1982	2002
Maintain farm books and records	64%	81%
Supervise farm work of other family members	18%	60%
Supervise the work of hired help	4%	26%
Deal with sales people regarding farm purchases	15%	41%
Deal with buyers regarding farm products	8%	19%
Deal with consumers regarding farm products	9%	27%

### FARM HOUSEHOLD TASKS PERFORMED REGULARLY BY WOMEN

	1982	2002
Cook, clean for the family	99%	99%
Cook, clean for the hired help	21%	19%
Care of garden for family consumption	92%	65%
Care of animals for family consumption	32%	48%
Canning and freezing for family consumption	93%	69%
Care for children	75%	75%
Care for aged or chronically ill family members	4%	43%



# Women's Work is NEVER DONE

Farm chores used to be defined by gender, but no more. Most women now do everything on the farm; some even run single-handed operations.

Over the past quarter-century, particularly the past 10 years, many influences have dramatically affected women's roles on family farms. Expansion of corporate farm operations which has increased competition; rising equipment, labour and operation costs; changing taxation and subsidies; challenging weather; crop and livestock diseases; globalization of markets; and environmental concerns are just some of the factors Canadian farm families continue to deal with. The result is that more women are doing more work on the farm and more farmers, especially women, are working off-farm to subsidize the family income.

Young women who are keen on the farming business can learn much from experienced Manitoba role models like Connie-Lou Preisntanz and Renske Kaastra.

## A PASSION FOR HORSES AND CATTLE, TOO

Connie-Lou runs her own farming operation near Neepawa, although she didn't grow up on a farm. "I always liked country life and had horses from the time I was 12," she says, "but as time went on and I worked with cattle in the U.S., I found I had a passion for cattle as well as horses.

"In the early '90s, my ex-husband and I bought a three-quarter section farm and had 75 to 80 cows. I stayed home and managed the farm, feeding, making hay – everything that went with a cattle operation."

After her divorce, Connie-Lou bought out her husband's share of the farm, which was down to a quarter-section. She got a couple of small loans through the Farm Credit Corporation, bought seven bred heifers and went to work on her own. Today, she has 33 head of cattle, 26 of which are cows.

"I only took small loans. I wasn't going to get in over my head and lose everything," she says. "I did it little by little. I stayed with a small operation, something I'm comfortable with."

Connie-Lou has dealt with the same challenges all farmers face and has adapted her operation to meet her needs. "I used to be on the farm 365 days of the year because money was tight. Now, I'm able to work off-farm as well. I like it because I get to see and talk to people through my part-time job with the 4-H Council, and then go home to my cattle, horse and dog."

She did (and still does) all her own repairs. She made all her own hay and straw at first and only invested in a tractor,

bale elevator, horse trailer, and a swather that she says she never uses. "The cost of repairs and fuel for equipment is too high, though, and for the limited number of cattle I have, it doesn't make sense to have my own baler, etc. So, now, I buy all my hay and straw and make enough with the sale of my calves to pay for it, as well as my farm loans."

## ASKING QUESTIONS, ATTENDING MEETINGS, AND READING ARE BEST WAYS TO LEARN

Connie-Lou would advise other women who farm to ask experts a lot of questions, go to agricultural and business meetings that will keep you informed and read as much as you can. "I learned a lot from a vet I worked with in the U.S., read, went to meetings and talked to successful cattle farmers who were willing to share good honest information."

She met the challenges of farming head on, admitting that she wasn't as physically strong or as mechanically inclined as many male farmers... "but there are men farmers who are not mechanically inclined either."

Yet, she's been strong enough and mechanical enough to succeed at her dream. The majority of the time, she says, she has had to rely on her own abilities, teach herself or learn from others. Because of her limited budget, she avoids hiring any help unless she has to.

If she could improve things for other farm women, she says, she'd make it easier – financially, mentally and emotionally – for women to get into farming. Many women, she says, are just not given the opportunities to go into farming when they're growing up. However, Connie-Lou says, anything is possible if you have the courage to go after it.

"A number of years ago, I would have done anything to live the life I'm living now, but I didn't have the courage to try – honestly believed I could not do it. But because I stayed with a small operation and took one step at a time, I have been able to enjoy my passion."

## BIGGEST CHALLENGE WAS MASTERING THE MACHINERY

Renske Kaastra's entry into farming differs greatly from that of Connie-Lou, but her passion for it is just as strong.

"I was raised with animals from day one," Renske says. "My dad was a cattle dealer and there would be cows at times and he kept milk sheep for quite a few years. My mom made cheese and I can remember learning to milk sheep at age five."

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# FARM WOMEN NETWORK, LEARN AND *RE-ENERGIZE*



What do ergonomics, globalization and chocolate fondue have in common? The answer is: the Farm Women's Conference in Winnipeg, November 5 to 7, 2006, says conference chair Leslie Reimer. The annual conference is the only provincial gathering of farm women designed specifically to meet their unique education and social needs.

"More and more women need this conference," Leslie explains, "because the roles of farm women are diversifying so quickly. Farming has changed into a dynamic, progressively aggressive business with a global scope."

Farm women, many of whom now work off-farm to reinforce the family income, constantly need to re-evaluate their roles and update themselves on topics and skills that affect them as women, business partners, farm workers, managers, mothers and wives. The conference has been supporting Manitoba farm women in their changing roles for the past 20 years, evolving as farm women have evolved.

"Many Manitoba farm women won't allow themselves the time to attend the conference, these days," says Leslie. "Their lives are so busy, they find it difficult to justify a couple of days out of their demanding schedules to talk to other farm women, learn new information and skills, or take a few minutes just to breathe and re-energize."

Yet, she points out, the very fact that women are so pressured is exactly the reason they need to attend the conference – to talk to women facing similar challenges, to find new or better ways to handle the many demands in their daily lives, and to get much needed information and support that will help them juggle their numerous roles. As well, Leslie says, the conference is an opportunity to step out of the isolation farm women occasionally feel and reinforce the common bonds they all share.

This year's conference highlights will appeal to women of all ages and backgrounds. They include motivational speaker and counsellor Bill Gordon who will talk about "Laughter, Learning, Leisure and Love" in his keynote address, plus seminars on global consumer trends, ergonomics, cattle age verification, antiques and household secrets. And for fun, there's the chocolate fondue party, the mini market featuring local artisans and a performance by Men in Kilts.

There's something of interest and value for all of Manitoba's farm women at this year's conference, so make your physical, mental and emotional health a priority – plan to attend the 2006 Farm Women's Conference. Cost is \$135 for the three day event. For early birds who register before October 15, the cost is \$125.

For more information, to register, book a table for the mini market, or become a sponsor, e-mail [infor@manitobafarmwomensconference.ca](mailto:infor@manitobafarmwomensconference.ca); or visit [www.manitobafarmwomensconference.ca](http://www.manitobafarmwomensconference.ca).

#### **To volunteer, contact:**

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*Information provided by Jill Falloon,  
Skills Development Specialist*

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Growing up in Germany, Renske preferred spending time with girlfriends who were from farms and learned to milk cows at age 11 on her friend's farm. "I was an outdoor person and my mom could not keep me inside, even in poor weather," she recalls.

While she worked in offices and shops for a few years, she says it's not surprising that she married a dairy farmer in 1965. The couple moved to Canada in 1979 and started farming in Rosburn. They have 250 cows in their cow-calf and backgrounding operation, which they raise on 10 quarters of land.

Renske does all the same work her husband does, "except fix machinery and welding. I don't like mowing hay, but if it has to be done, I will. I bale all the hay and straw and make arrangements with local grain farmers to bale straw.

"All the office work is mine – writing letters, phoning suppliers, bookkeeping, paying bills and keeping cattle records," she says. "I also get consulted on equipment purchases."

Renske and her husband both do the calving and take turns checking on the cattle in mid-March. "We do a walk-about each morning together to tag, vaccinate and castrate the new calves because it's too dangerous a job to do alone with some new mommas."

Now that the couple's four children are off on their own, Renske again shares the summer chores of checking cattle in the pasture and mending fences. She says her biggest learning challenges were dealing with equipment – "connecting hydraulic hoses, sometimes the power take-off (PTO), and reaching clutches or foot pedals." But she managed to master equipment use along with her business and livestock management skills.

## QUALITY CHILD CARE REMAINS AN ISSUE FOR FARM FAMILIES

If she could change things for other farm women, she says, she'd make it easier for them to get quality child care so they didn't have to take small children on tractors or into risky situations where they have to be carefully watched. However, she says, the upside is that a farm is a great place to raise children.

She believes the challenges women farmers face are the same as those faced by men farmers – the constraints of environmental issues, taxes and restrictions on some farming operations that make small tasks into big jobs.

Her advice to young women farmers who are married to farmers and active on the farm or working off-farm, is to "be sure to have your share of the farm in your own name; have your own RRSPs and CPP; and file your own income tax return." This kind of financial independence just makes good common sense, she says. She also says that if you need to buy something on credit, don't use credit cards. "Figure out what it will cost to buy something on credit, decide if it's worth it and then get a bank loan if you need it."

Despite all the challenges farmers are facing these days, Renske is still convinced it's the best life for her. "We're very happy we moved to Canada and love to live here, even though farming is a lot of work."

Information provided by Jill Falloon, Skills Development Specialist, Brandon

Prepared by Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives.



### DID WE MISS ANYONE?

If you know any young farmer who did not receive a copy of *The Young Farmers Newsletter* have them contact us at [youngfarmers@gov.mb.ca](mailto:youngfarmers@gov.mb.ca) and we will gladly send a copy to them.

### SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

We'd like to know what you think of *The Young Farmers Newsletter*, and what you'd like to read about in future issues. E-mail your thoughts to us at [youngfarmers@gov.mb.ca](mailto:youngfarmers@gov.mb.ca)

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MAFRI'S website for young farmers provides you with detailed information on programs and services profiled in this newsletter and much more. You'll also find links to valuable resources on other public and private sector sites. Visit the young farmers website today at [www.manitoba.ca/agriculture/financial/youngfarmers](http://www.manitoba.ca/agriculture/financial/youngfarmers)