

RITA in Action

## **A Summer of Learning: Women's Learning Circles Along the White River**

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Women for the Land (W4L), a statewide initiative to bolster conservation and natural resource education for women, was awarded a 2025 CWI grant to extend and expand that work in Indiana. A primary objective of that grant is to host discussion circles across the state on key topics like soil health, water quality, and invasive species management. Many SWCDs submitted letters of support pledging to host three circles over the grant period - one event per year. Delaware, Hamilton, and Madison counties went right to work - I have already hosted five circles with even more planned for the rest of the year.



Women's learning circles intentionally curate a small-group environment where participants and professionals learn from each other. Through this model, we seek to empower female decision-makers in spaces from which they've historically been excluded and underrepresented. Participants range from urban sustainability enthusiasts to sisters managing inherited acres to beginning farmers trying to be heard in their communities. Across the five circles this year, I heard time and time again how valuable that space to be vulnerable and ask silly questions was to someone taking the first (or next) step of their conservation journey.

There is not a cookie-cutter method to organize circles - and they often do best with collaborative support. In Delaware and Madison Counties, I met female landowners who were



passionate about invasive plant management and wanted to “do something about it already”. They were gracious enough to open their homes to interested women from across the county - and on a Saturday, no less. Because we had a “civilian” collaborator, the event's reach was much broader than the typical SWCD audience and SWCD staff made brand new connections in their counties. We also recruited a few more members for local CISMAs to continue their conservation indoctrin-, I mean education.

In Hamilton County, I worked with The Nature Conservancy, W4L, and another RITA technician to host a summer series of circles with one per month starting in July. I led discussions and demonstrations about soil health in the first circle. We built upon that to learn about conservation values and planning, regenerative practices, and many bonus topics like leases and easements. We took field trips to tour conservation practices in row crop and diversified agriculture while learning about the reality of conservation adoption. This series connected us to landowners across Central Indiana representing hundreds of acres of rented farmground. We provided soil tests free of charge to participants and connected them with their NRCS and SWCD resources to go further.

Consistently across these circles, the women were never ready to be done. They wanted to learn more, inquiring about book clubs or future gatherings. Participants eagerly offered their own homes so we could continue the discussion. W4L is committed to cultivating a community of like-minded women to ask and answer questions - both in circles and after. Stay tuned while we develop and roll out an online community to support our in-person work.

