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**EDITORS:** The following information is for immediate release. If you have any questions, please contact Sue Milshaw, agricultural program manager of the Chester County Economic Development Council, at 610 458-5700.

*Women farmers in Pennsylvania increase by 41 percent*

**Karen Vollmecke of Coatesville's Vollmecke Orchards completes Annie's Project, was Farmer of the Year**

**EXTON** \_ Karen Vollmecke's choice of farming as a career is becoming less of a rarity for women in Pennsylvania.

The United States Department of Agriculture reported this month that women who are primary farm operators increased from 6,000 in 2002 to more than 8,500 in 2007, a 41 percent increase. The report by the National Agriculture Statistics Service provides the only source of uniform, comprehensive agricultural data for every county in the nation.

"Farming is becoming a viable choice for women and young couples in Pennsylvania," said Gary Smith, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Chester County Economic Development Council. "The Development Council provides loan programs for farmers and supports educational programs, such as Annie's Project. Karen Vollmecke is a prime example of a young Chester County woman farmer."

The Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network (PA-WAgN) began as a county Extension program of Penn State University in 2003 as a comprehensive educational program and support network for farm and ranch women. Its objective is to "empower farm women to be better farm business partners through networks and by managing and organizing critical decision making information." Annie's Project, a program run in conjunction with PA-WAgN, uses the premise that there are many learning avenues and abundant technologies to manage a farm and ranch business.

Winifred W. McGee, Lebanon County Extension Director of Penn State Extension, said classes are held during the year for women farmers. According to a Penn State publication, "Annie's Project has been adapted to Pennsylvania's needs over the past couple years from namesake Illinois farmer Annie Fleck (1922-97) and her daughter Ruth Fleck Hambleton, who fashioned the program after the practices of her own mother, who died a wealthy farm woman. The elder woman worked hard (milking cows and running an egg route) and smart (keeping detailed records that told her which ventures to hold or fold) and bold (sending her husband to work off-farm). Hambleton works at the University of Illinois as farm business management and marketing educator."

Annie's Project focuses on the five areas of risk management that all farmers face. They are marketing, production, financial, human resources and family/community in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania is one of more than 30 states with variations of Annie's Project. A set of the earlier classes was held in Exton.

Vollmecke said when she heard of Annie's project she took part in the series of six classes where McGee and John Berry were instructors. "It was Winifred's idea to bring a pilot program to Pennsylvania and try it out. There was a nice group of women and we had some pretty lively discussions. We learned from our experiences and it was just not paper in front of you. All of the individuals in the class shared their stories. The classes have great value and it is a valuable program for Pennsylvania."

Vollmecke Orchards is a 37-acre family-owned farm and orchard on Cedar Knoll Road in Coatesville. The operation grows a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. The orchards include a 130-member Community Supported Agriculture and offers retail sales as well. Crops and products offered include fruits, vegetables, fresh eggs, fruit butters, honey, maple syrup, herbs, cut flowers and compost.

"We grow all of our vegetables naturally, without synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, genetically modified organisms or sewage sludge. We use crop rotation, cover crops and compost extensively to enrich our soil so it will support a teeming soil biology that, in turn, supports healthy plants. We describe this as growing naturally," The Vollmecke Orchard website says.

Karen Vollmecke said, "We interact with our CSA members and listen to their needs and desires and we try to incorporate them into our vision. We're always tweaking what we do. We recently added a greenhouse and during the past season we added a new product line, pasta sauce made from our fresh ingredients. We use quality ingredients."

Vollmecke was named Chester County farmer of the year in 2006 by county's agriculture committee.

The Chester County Economic Development Council is a private, non-profit economic development organization that has been nurturing economic growth in Chester County and the surrounding region for more than 45 years. The Council's portfolio of business growth services includes: low-interest financing, small business lending, workforce training, retention and expansion, customized international business assistance, land and building site selection, brownfields consultation and remediation, urban redevelopment, and agricultural economic development. The Council also offers state-of-the art conference and training facilities at its brand new facility in Eagleview. For more information, see [www.cceconomicdevelopment.com](http://www.cceconomicdevelopment.com).