Every Farmer Counts

For more than 75 years, the U.S. has observed National Farm Safety and Health Week by Presidential Proclamation. President Roosevelt signed the first observance in 1944 in the middle of World War II, noting the importance of American farmers and ranchers to both the war efforts and as important partners in national and global peace and prosperity.

Now, in 2020, in the midst of global pandemic, we continue to recognize the important contribution of the agricultural industry and the men and women who work hard as farm owners and operators, family members, and hired full-time, part-time and seasonal employees producing the food that feeds a growing world population.

This year’s theme for National Farm Safety and Health Week, is “Every Farmer Counts.” We understood this clearly in early 2020 as we began to see lines at grocery stores and occasional shortages of food and other supplies as a result of challenges to our agricultural, food, manufacturing and distribution supply chains. We also witnessed the impact unique workplace health exposures had among migrant, immigrant, and other workers on farms and in related food and meat processing facilities and how illness connected to workplace exposure could affect all of us!

“Farmers are clearly critical and are recognized nationwide as being part of a vital and essential part of our economy and workforce even during challenging times,” said John Shutske, Professor and Director of UW Center for Agricultural Safety and Health and Extension specialist. “We often talk about farming being the nation’s ‘most dangerous’ occupation as is measured by the number of deaths per 100,000 workers. Those who work on farms and ranches experience a fatality rate that is about seven times higher than the average of all workers in the U.S. – even when you include those who work in manufacturing, mining, construction, and service industries.”

Yet – we cannot only look at the numbers and the statistics. Every farmer counts. Every person who dies or is seriously injured or gets sick as a result of a workplace exposure or hazard is an individual. Those who are seriously injured or experience work-related health problems often have families. Farm safety and health issues impact parents, children, grandparents, and the extended community. Those who have attended a funeral or visitation service of someone who has lost their life as a result of a farm “accident” are often surprised to see hundreds or even thousands show up to pay respect and honor and celebrate their values, hard work and efforts.

“As we’ve highlighted the dangers and unique health concerns farmers, workers and family members have faced these last 76 years, it’s also important to note that progress has been made,” said Cheryl Skjolaas, Agricultural Safety and Health Senior Outreach Specialist and Extension specialist. “Farms have gotten safer – even in the past few decades. The current rate of workplace fatalities in farming as is documented by the National Safety Council, is 22.8 per 100,000 workers – it was 42 per 100,000 in 1990 – so we have seen a 46% reduction in the per capita death rate during that 30-year time period. But, this did not happen without huge effort and specific, positive, measurable action and attention.”

Shutske and Skjolaas have both been part of farm safety and health research and educational efforts for over 30 years. Their work continues to address priority issues for the Wisconsin agricultural community as well as contributing to national and international efforts. Knowing that ‘Every Farmer Counts’ and to mark National Safety and Health week, they provide these action items that correspond to the five daily themes of this year’s event.

**Tractor Safety & Rural Roadway Safety:** Start by making sure all tractors in routine use for work on farms are equipped with a rollover protective structure (ROPS) and seatbelt. Older, pre-ROPS tractors on farms are not uncommon—but wherever possible, their use should be limited and curtailed or reserved for parades, tractor shows, or other special events. Where a ROPS retrofit is not practical or possible, these machines should only be operated by experienced adults and their use should be limited as much as possible to level ground and other lower risk uses. As greater distances traveled between farmstead and field, roadway crashes have become a significant issue. Any time you operate on the highway, your equipment should be brightly lit, visible from both the front and rear, and flashers should always be used (even at times not legally required). For equipment where running electrical wiring is expensive or difficult, check with your local equipment dealer for low-cost LED flashers and lights that can be battery powered, magnetically-mounted, and easily moved between equipment pieces to improve safety.

**Overall Farmer Health:**Farm work is generally healthy, especially when physical activity is involved, yet farmers are faced with a number of unique situations – dusts, gases, pesticides and other workplace hazards. Additionally, in 2020, we’ve added the potential for farmers and farmworkers to have exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19, particularly on farm operations with multiple workers who are working in close contact or who share transportation, housing, restroom and lunch facilities. It is strongly recommended that farm operators/employers work with local experts – including Extension educators, specialists, and health experts (doctors, nurses, public health, etc.) who can provide advice on reducing risk through appropriate selection of protective equipment, and control of health hazards. In addition, for both physical and mental health, we strongly recommend regular visits, checkups and other preventive healthcare for all in our farming communities.

**Safety & Health for Youth in Agriculture:**In the last three decades, we’ve paid a great deal of attention to the unique hazards that youth face on farms from the time they are toddlers up through late adolescence. Make sure all activities on farms are properly supervised. For kids who will be working, make sure they are only assigned jobs that are within their abilities based on their size, maturity, and abilities to process information and make decisions. To learn more, visit:  [**https://cultivatesafety.org/**](https://cultivatesafety.org/)  In addition, for those in their early teens consult with local Extension educators on legal employment requirements and training programs for youth being hired to operate tractors and other farm machines.

**Emergency Preparedness in Agriculture:**A focus of safety and health is prevention. But occasionally bad things do occur. Every farm should have one or more people trained in basic first aid and CPR. As we’ve seen with COVID-19, it is also important to have plans in place for unexpected events like a pandemic, natural disaster, fire or other unexpected events. We know that the first moments, hours or days following an emergency event are crucial. Knowing what to do within the first minutes of a farm injury can mean the difference between life and death. Take the time to learn more by checking out the first aid and disaster resources at: [**https://nasdonline.org/browse.php**](https://nasdonline.org/browse.php)

**Safety & Health for Women in Agriculture:**Women play an increasingly critical role in operating farms and ranches nationwide. In 2017, almost 30% of the nation’s principal farm operators who responded to the U.S. Census of Agriculture were women – a number that more than doubled in only five years. Women face unique concerns while working on farms. For example, women are especially at risk for injuries when working with large animals (dairy and beef cattle especially) as compared to men who are most often injured as a result of machinery-related hazards. Additionally, women working in animal agriculture may be exposed to animal health products that create unique health risks – one example is when women administer reproductive hormones to animals.  To learn more about prevention and control of exposures that disproportionately affect women, check out: [**https://www.agrisafe.org/women-in-ag-resource**](https://www.agrisafe.org/women-in-ag-resource)

Every individual working in the Wisconsin agricultural industry counts and has a part in safety and health prevention efforts. For further information from the UW Center for Agricultural Safety and Health at [**https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/agsafety/**](https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/agsafety/)