

Agronomy Agent's Corner #7

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Farm Safety

Safety is always a major concern on farms. In high school, my power mechanics teacher asked the class one day “what is the most dangerous profession in the U.S?” His answer was farming. I don’t know if he had data to back up his statement, but the intent of the question was to point out how many hats farmers wear. The reasoning was farmers are distracted from focusing on safety from having many other career tasks. Farmers are heavy equipment operators, hazardous material handlers, biologists, mechanics, and businesspeople.

The risks of farming have not left those close to me unscathed. My father had a head injury from dropping boards while preparing to rebuild a horse stall. I fell in a gopher hole while measuring out plots for a study. The resulting injury required a knee surgery and several months of rehab. Others working in neighboring farms lost their lives to vehicle accidents.

Risks can be reduced by using the following tools.

Tailgate meetings

The idea of a tailgate meeting is to have a ten to fifteen-minute discussion each week to remind workers of how to mitigate a specific risk. It is a good idea to look ahead to see if any job tasks will be occurring in the next week that have not been completed recently. If corn planting is coming up, a good tailgate meeting would be repetitive motion or heavy lifting. If your team will be handling a particularly hazardous chemical like paraquat, reading over the safety data sheet would be the appropriate tailgate meeting. Getting into the habit of discussing potential risks shortly before working around the risks decreases the chances of a major injury. Ohio State University has a list of tailgate meeting topics available at <https://ohioline.osu.edu/tags/agricultural-tailgate-safety-training-operators-and-supervisors>. If you do not find a meeting guideline here that you are looking for, please contact me and I will look for other sources. Or work with you to create a summary of the topic.

CDMS

Crop Data Management Systems, Inc has a large database available to review EPA approved application labels as well as safety data sheets for farm chemicals. This tool will help train in not only the safety aspects of chemical handling, but also to learn on the active ingredients and labeled crops for each branded product.

WPS

Farm owners are mandated to provide each worker on the farm that is not an immediate family member with eight hours of safety training as described by OSHA on an annual basis. The training is known as the Worker Protection Standards (WPS). This training allows those without a pesticide applicator’s license to handle restricted use pesticides under the guidance of a licensed applicator. Key aspects of WPS training are ladder safety, heavy lifting, repetitive motion injuries, how to read a safety data sheet, handling of pesticide contaminated clothing, and recognizing the systems of pesticide exposure.

Mental Health

Social isolation and long work hours are both risks factors to mental health. Farmers are exposed to both on a regular basis. According to Health Day in some years the farmer suicide rate is up to five times that of any other occupation. The added stress of a financial downturn only adds to this risk. Please speak openly about mental health concerns with your physician.