

Been farming long?

If not, you're at high risk for injury

Men and women who've been farming less than 10 years are at high risk for injury because agriculture is one of the most dangerous industries in the U.S.

Dr. Douglas H. Schaufler at Penn State's Department of Agricultural & Biological Engineering says some of today's farmers didn't grow up on the farm, increasing their risk of injury on the job.

"If you didn't grow up on a farm, there will be hazards and risks you just don't recognize," Schaufler says. "Beginning farmers who did farm with their family may have been exposed to unsafe practices that they implement on their own operation."

Some 10 years ago, with USDA grant money, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture supported development of a safety manual inexperienced farmers and ranchers can use to help establish safe practices.

"Safety and Health Management Planning for General Farmers and Ranchers," a 58-page manual, outlines how to establish safety policy and procedures, how to identify and assess on-farm hazards and risks, prevent and control hazards and risks and educate and train family members and employees. The manual was authored by Penn State's now-retired Sam Steele and Dennis J. Murphy and is available through Penn State Extension publication's website.

"One common hazard for beginning farmers occurs when they search for a tractor to purchase," Schaufler says. "Typically, the farmer is focusing on tractor price, looking for the lowest price without regard to whether or not the tractor is equipped

with seat belts, roll-over-protective structures (ROPS), a wide front end for stability and other safety considerations."

A "Simple Hazard Checklist" found in the manual mentioned here helps farmers understand that ROPS, seat belts, PTO master shields, and other safety features are key elements in working safely on the farm.

Establishing safety policies and procedures begins with making safety a priority on the operation. A policy describing the "who-what-when-where-why" of the farm's safety focus can help clarify what safety practices are in place and who is responsible for different elements of the policy.

Safety rules should be simply stated, provided in a language all workers can understand and developed with input from employees. Periodic safety audits can help identify any safety issues and further communicate safety procedures.

In identifying safety hazards on the farm, farmers should consider all equipment, buildings, hand and power tools, animals, roadways, chemicals and working surfaces. Hazards can be prioritized in order to be addressed and corrected. A hazard checklist (provided in the manual or available on insurance company and farm safety websites) can help simplify the process.

Preventing and controlling hazards and risks can greatly reduce damage to people, products and the environment. Steps to prevention can be applied to people, products and objects. Prevention planning involves identifying opportunities for preventing a problem before it happens, managing it while and/or after

it happens.

Prevention practices may involve training people, using safer products or removing hazardous conditions from the work site. One example is hitching tractors in a way that causes the tractor to tip over backwards. While avoiding this kind of situation is a good safety practice, roll-over-protective structures (ROPS) and seat belt use can greatly reduce harm to the farmer if a tractor does tip over while they're using it.

Schaufler recommends that inexperienced farmers and ranchers seek out mentors who can provide insight when they're dealing with equipment purchases or livestock handling or other farm activities that aren't familiar to them.

"Many times beginning farmers are strapped for money," Schaufler says. "And they're more focused on how they can save money on a purchase or activity than on the safety aspects of that activity."

Schaufler points out that using equipment that's either too big or too small for the job can add significant risks to an activity.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) is an important safety element on the farm because some activities involving hazardous conditions, i.e. excessive noise, are difficult to avoid or eliminate, but can be mitigated with the use of PPE. Equipment that protects the farmer's or employee's hearing is critical to safely completing this type of activity.

"PPE does nothing to prevent or correct hazards," Schaufler says. "However, it limits the amount of damage or level of injury or illness the hazard causes."

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Safety education and training should be available to both employees and any of the farmer's family members involved in farming activities. Helping adult workers and family members understand why one procedure is safer than another helps motivate them to implement safe practices. Examples of how they can apply training information to their own situations can further engage employees.

Training sessions can be as short as 5 or 10 minutes and can be conducted on the work site. When applicable, use of hands-on training – such as fit-testing a respirator – can help workers learn proper methods for using equipment. Outside presenters can bring variety to training events to help retain worker attention.

Open communication that allows workers to feel comfortable enough to report hazardous incidents or circumstances they have experienced or identified can help reduce the risk of injury. Teaching CPR and first-aid as well as how to properly report and document emergencies should be part of worker training. Newspaper and other media articles can also be used in training events.

"Some safety practices are really simple," Schaufler says. "Employees or any family members working on the farm should feel comfortable about asking how to use equipment or complete a task if they aren't sure. Many farms hold weekly or at least monthly meetings to talk about farm activities. Safety concerns should always be a topic at those meetings."

Evaluating a farm's safety and health environment can be as simple as observing employees on the job, providing short pre- and post-tests before and after a training session and asking employees to demonstrate newly learned skills and capabilities following a training event.

"Safety discussions should also include activities that may be taking a toll on the body, such as lifting heavy objects or working in an unsafe manner," Schaufler says. "Discussion should center around how that activity could be done differently and more safely."

"The best safety practice is incorporating a safety mindset on the farm from the start," Schaufler says.