TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE DATE: 7/19/12

EPISODE NAME: The International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health

Today on Across the Fence we spotlight an important agricultural issue. Safety. We're going to learn how accidents have an impact far beyond the farm gate and how agricultural professionals nation-wide are helping farmers be safe and stay safe. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us, I am Judy Simpson. We've all heard the cliché safety is no accident. For farm workers workplace safety really is a matter of life and death. University of Vermont Extension is a nation-wide leader in working to help farmers and their families at home with issues regarding health and safety. Recently agricultural professionals across the globe visited Vermont to take part in a conference on Ag Health and safety issues. Across the Fence’s Keith Silva has our story.

Safety is not guaranteed – especially when working with big equipment and large animals. Agriculture ranks as one of the most dangerous industries worldwide. Every day 243 agricultural workers suffer a serious lost-work time injury according to the United States Department of Labor.

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At a recent conference for the International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health … agricultural professionals from around the world met in Vermont to network and to raise awareness about farm safety.

Marsha Purcell // President, International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health: “We have this idyllic picture of what farming is like and that’s not necessarily what it is. […] The more we can help people understand that, yes, farming is a wonderful way of life, but it can also be extremely dangerous and all of those hazards and health issues can impact what the consumers get. If a farmer is injured and can’t maintain the farm they may lose the farm.”

University of Vermont Extension is a nationwide leader in the promotion and the education of farm safety. Programs like the roll-over protective structure or ROPS provide farmers with a rebate to retrofit older tractors with roll-over bars. UVM Extension’s AgrAbility program helps farmers who have been injured on the job or suffer from a disability due to farm work.

Purcell: “I think in some states they would be very envious of what’s going in Vermont and the amount of emphasis that’s been put on Ag. safety and health. Some states do very well; it varies, but the more we can learn and see -- that’s one of the things that we learn at conferences like this: we may find an agency or department that we haven’t even thought of that we could work with when we go home to broaden that impact that we have in engaging more people in helping to understand that issue.”
Farm families – especially children – are an important part of farm safety. UVM Extension’s 4-H program works with its members to learn how to safely operate farm machinery and how to behave around animals that are often ten times the size of a child.

4-H also provides outreach in schools by providing curriculum to teachers or taking part in safety fairs like this one at the Peacham School.

Ruth Vaal RN//Peacham School Nurse: “Many of these students here at Peacham come from farms. The farm is, especially to a child, very inviting, you know, children are very curious by nature and they’re drawn to a farm to the animals to the equipment the tractors and often my fear is that often especially if they’ve grown up around a farm they may be a little too comfortable around it so I really wanted to make sure that they were aware of some of the dangers around a farm.

Mycah King//6th Grade Peacham School: “Farms are everywhere in Peacham pretty much, there’s a farm down there and like if you’re crossing the road and there’s a big tractor that’s blocking you and there’s a car coming and the car doesn’t see you you can get hit and injured.

Purcell: “we work so hard in making sure youth are trained and can do age appropriate tasks on the farm. They’re our future. The average age of farmers are in the mid-50’s or higher and if we don’t have young people coming up and learning how to farm and learning how to safely farm we won’t have that industry in the future so it’s extremely important we involve youth in the farming op. but make sure they do it safely.”

In addition to information sessions and impromptu meetings with colleagues, these attendees hit the road to visit the front lines of agricultural health and safety … Vermont farms.

One stop on the tour was the Conant farm in Richmond. A little bit of rain didn’t dampen anyone’s spirits as Dave Conant, his wife Deb and their son Ransom talked shop in the farm’s repair shop. The Conant’s were awarded the Vermont Governor’s Award for Outstanding Workplace Safety in 2011.

Vermont dairy farms are small compared to other operations around the county. Large or small – safety always comes first.

Karen Funkenbusch//University of Missouri Extension: They have a farm safe program for this operation here, not a lot of our farmers in Missouri have that type of program so that’s a program that would be of benefit and interest to our Missouri dairy operators that are very large.”

As the tour went through the barn and the milking parlor, Funkenbusch saw several things that she’s going to bring back with her to the ‘show-me’ state.

Karen Funkenbusch//University of Missouri Extension: “it is important to know where our food comes from, but it’s also very important to make sure that we keep the individuals that are producing our food production safe and healthy. And that is critical and that’s why we’re here today that’s what were here to learn the importance that safety does come first, that health does come first because if you don’t have a healthy safe family you can’t have good food, you can’t have a healthy product out there for our American folks.”
Kelly Donham of Iowa was impressed by how the Conant’s make safety and health concerns a part of their daily chores and routines.

Kelly Donham/University of Iowa: “As this particular farm right here has cut out sort of a wedge in their production system and in their management system that includes safety and I think too many of our farms you said they’re bigger in Iowa and they are it’s not uncommon that we’re farming three, four, five thousand acres and that issue of safety is not on the radar screen. We need to try to import some of that to our state and to make that part of the management system and production system of each operation.”

One phrase that is often heard during discussions about farm safety is ‘it can’t happen to me.’ Donham believes that farmers need to realize that there is no truth to this statement.

Donham: “we need to try to create that situation that it can happen to us, it really can. It’s not just you but the tremendous effect on your whole family when that happens the tremendous effect on the community; we need to keep that in mind.”

Conant: “you can’t afford any accidents and we don’t want anyone to be hurt whether it’s to slip off a skid steer loader because you didn’t go down the steps the right way or you know it sounds a little bit hokey you say guys, hey, how about turning around and going the right way, you know.”

On the farm or in conversations with colleagues … these agricultural professionals are always thinking: safety first. In Richmond, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Thanks Keith. Joining me now is University of Vermont Extension's George Cook. At this point in his career George has earned the title of Mr. Farm Safety in Vermont. At the recent International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health conference George was named president. That's a first for Vermont; congratulations.

George.: Thank you.

Judy.: That's a big deal.

George.: It really is; it offers opportunity to bring leadership to the organization and a real honor to Vermont.

Judy.: We see a picture here of the president's gavel being given to you by Marcia Purcell who's the outgoing president. It's also the 50th Anniversary of the ISASH. What are your thoughts on this, on the mission of the society?

George.: As I said it's a real honor for myself and the state of Vermont. We've never had this conference in Vermont before so it was nice to be able to bring that here. ISASH is an organization that is aimed at providing information educational opportunities for farm safety and health professionals. We see technical presentations throughout the week. Sharing ideas research with one another and I think probably one of the most important things for me having been involved in this organization for the last 20 to 25 years is the networking and developing close working relationships with colleagues from across the country and across the world.

Judy.: What is the broader perspective of farm safety? How does an accident on the farm affect the community?

George.: An accident on a farm is not only a personal loss for the individual it's a loss to the farm, farm productivity and it's a broader loss to the community at large. For every farm fatality this costs the
community and country nearly $1,000,000 to society. This is been researched and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Judy.: In the video we heard about the ROPS program. Why are roll-over bars so important and why are not all tractors outfitted with them?

George.: Older tractors were not required to have roll-over bars and seat belts. Today they are but we have a lot of older tractors on smaller farms in Vermont. Most dairy farms will have at least one tractor that is newer and has rollover protective structures and seat belts on them. Smaller diversified farms which Vermont has a lot of and the northeast has a lot of these folks are putting up with older tractors that were made prior to this requirement that it be on there. Just look at the terrain we have a lot of rolling hills rough terrain so we're in an ideal setting for upset.

Judy.: Are there a lot of tractor accidents? Rollover accidents here?

George.: Fortunately not a lot. If one does rollover without the protection of the roll-over protective structure on it the risk is extremely high that there's going to be a very severe injury.

Judy.: What are some of the excuses that farmers use? I don't have time to research going to find the equipment to retrofit this old tractor. I don't have the money. How does the ROPS program address those?

George.: ROPS provides a toll free number that they can call. The person on the other end of the phone will do the intake get information from the tractor operator and they will do the research. They will find if there's a rollover protective structure available for that model tractor they will determine if it can be purchased from and the cost and get back to the tractor operator.

Judy.: Who's eligible for the ROPS program?

George.: Essentially anyone who has a tractor in Vermont. We encourage them to call the toll free number to see if there is a ROPS available for that. You do not have to be a commercial farmer.

Judy.: How does UVM Extension work with farmers and their families when there has been an accident? Maybe not a fatal accident but someone's been hurt or needs help with something.

George.: We've had a couple programs that have been working with farmers with disabilities that have had an injury. The Vermont AgrAbility project is currently under way where we work with farmers and make modifications to equipment and to the way of doing their business. The rural and ag voc rehab program that's been funded for the past 43 years through state division of voc rehab is another one. We've been able to work with farmers for many years helping them continue to do what they want to do. They want to farm.

Judy.: So whether it's adding steps of the tractor so it's easier to come into or adapting a seat to the tractor?

George.: Air ride seats you write the extra steps to the tractor step. An extra handhold to be able to grab and securely get up on the piece of equipment. Right down to changes in the way we're doing business of milking rather than have a couple of small blocks from one level to get down into the milking parlor adding some steps so that it's safer and easier. When knees get older hips get older and sometimes it's something as simple as arthritis that's kicking in and causing issues.

Judy.: We've been talking about physical issues what about mental health issues? I know it's a hard topic for a lot of people to talk about especially farmers.
George.: Farmers are no different than anyone else they're not exempt from these issues. We think of farmers being stoic and strong but hey they're people and when we're looking at the stresses that are ever present on today's farm mental health issues are part of it. We have programs like Farm First we have the Vermont farm health task force where were pulling people together from all walks of life and interest on-farm safety and health. We meet on a quarterly basis here in Vermont to work together to be able to provide services and assistance to those folks who need it.

Judy.: How does ISASH and UVM Extension help farm safety with kids? We saw a couple of programs of visiting schools for instance.

George.: Right visiting schools and certainly our 4-H program which is the Extension youth program we have special grants that are right here right now. Farm safety for youth programs over the years we've taught tractor safety programs to make sure our young operators know the safe principles to be following when they get behind the wheel. One that I pushed for was the no riders rule. There's one seat on the tractor that's for the operator there's no safe place for a second person.

Judy.: Interesting. For more information about the rebates for roll bars program or you can learn more at the website that's props4you.com/vt or you can call (802) 888-4972 that's (802) 888-4972. Four other farm safety services and program provided by the University of Vermont Extension you can visit uvm.edu/extension or you can call George toll free (866) 260-5603 that's (866) 260-5603. George thanks so much for joining us; it is such an important topic.

George.: Thank you very much for having me here.

Judy.: And congratulations again.

George.: Thank you.

Judy.: That's our program for today; I'm Judy Simpson. We will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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