

Health and safety critical to farm legacy

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In May of this year, a farmer in Southeast Iowa was pinned by a piece of machinery and killed; later that month, an eastern Iowa man was killed when his tractor was struck by a semi. In June, a teenage farm girl died in an ATV incident. These are just a few of the tragedies that will become Iowa's farm fatality statistics.

This year, the theme for National Farm Safety and Health Week is "Farm Safety. . . . A Legacy to be Proud of." We talk a lot about farm transitions in Iowa, as we work hard to develop a new generation of farmers to continue our traditions. Unfortunately, we do not incorporate the health and safety of those new farmers often enough into the legacy of farming.

Statistics from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) show that the fatality rate for farmers and farm workers is about 20 deaths per 100,000 workers. Compare this to the overall rate of occupational fatalities in the U.S. (3.4 per 100,000 workers) and it becomes clear that we have a problem with our agricultural legacy.

Research conducted in New York found that, within five years of a farm fatality, nearly three-quarters of the families who operated the farms where the incidents occurred no longer operated them, and nearly half no longer lived on the farms at all. These numbers are startling and should remind us all that a fatality in a farming family can eliminate the legacy of that farm all together.

Tractors, particularly tractor rollovers, remain the leading cause of injury and fatalities on farms in Iowa and nationwide. Nearly half of all tractors currently in operation do not have a rollover protective structure (ROPS), a requirement for any tractor manufactured after 1985. The use of a ROPS, with a fastened seatbelt, virtually eliminates the risk of a fatality if the tractor rolls over. Retrofitting a tractor requires some investment of time and money, but if it prevents a fatality, there is little question that it's worthwhile.

Tractors aren't the only farm hazard, as recent fatalities in grain bins and manure pits in Iowa show. As our grain storage capabilities increase, and livestock production becomes more and more efficient, the hazards to workers can also increase.

While fatalities clearly affect a farm's legacy, so do the less catastrophic injuries and diseases that tend to come with farm work. If there is one primary operator, the profit loss associated with time lost to recover from an injury can be a major setback. And don't forget the loss of quality, and sometimes length, of life associated with hearing loss, chronic lung disease or skin cancer — all prevalent conditions in agricultural workers.

The good news is that farm injuries, illnesses and fatalities are almost always preventable. Engineered solutions on tractors, including ROPS as well as shielding and guarding of moving parts, reduce loss of life and limbs. Having a safety plan, as any business should, can do a lot to identify and reduce hazards, encourage safe work practices and reduce injuries.

Iowa's farmers are the foundation of our most important economic industry, but the high rates of injuries, illnesses and fatalities that come with farming put the legacy of agriculture at risk.

For more information, go to www.i-cash.org.

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