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For More Information:

ELLEN G. DUYSSEN

Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

University of Nebraska Medical Center

College of Public Health, Room 3035

984388 Nebraska Medical Center

Omaha, NE 68198-4388

402.552.3394

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WORKING IN A TINY SPACE?

Don't let it be the last place you work.

What are some unique hazards facing farmers when they work in a confined space?

Safety professional, trainer and owner of Oklahoma's Moore Ag Safety, Gordon Moore, says flowing grain or products, falls, lack of oxygen and heat exhaustion are among the incidents that can lead to confined space injury or death. Recognizing potential hazards and developing a plan to avoid them are key to working safely in these areas on the farm.

Moore points to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) definition of confined space as a guide to help identify a confined space.

"You can think of a confined space as any area that's large enough for a person to fit into, but it's not normal for humans to be inside it," Moore says. "OSHA's confined space definition has three parts."

OSHA identifies confined space as:

- An area large enough for a person to enter and fully perform some type of activity;
- An area not designed for continuous human occupancy;
- An area with limited or restricted means of entry or exit.

Areas on the farm that fit this description include tanks, storage bins, silos, pits and diked areas.

“Another sub-part of a confined space definition is an area with sloping walls, some type of hazardous or toxic atmosphere or potential for a person to be trapped or asphyxiated,” Moore says. “It’s important to recognize a confined space and take the time to know how to handle yourself in that area.”

Grain bins can quickly trap people working inside them, but large grain carts also pose life threatening hazards caused by flowing grain. Flowing grain has been referred to as “Quicksand of the Midwest” because it has the same characteristics of quicksand: pulling people in and trapping or engulfing them.

In grain transport vehicles, grain can flow like it would in a grain bin. Many times young farm children are most at risk of entrapment or engulfment and suffocation in these types of vehicles due to playing in and around equipment.

“In any confined space, workers should never be alone,” Moore says. “There should be at least one person who can call for help if it’s needed. Flowing grain, dust and heat can all lead to grain engulfment inside a bin.”

Other hazardous confined spaces include livestock feed product bins, molasses tanks and some feed mill “boot pits”. Fertilizer tanks and fuel tanks are also hazardous when someone goes inside them.

“A farmer going inside a tank could be overcome by a lack of oxygen or sheer heat, depending on outside temperatures,” Moore says. “In feed yards, workers may not think of the back of a feed truck as a hazardous confined space. However, the live-bottom floor or auger pose serious safety risks.”

Key safety steps for working in confined spaces include making sure no one goes into a confined space without at least one other person constantly monitoring their status. In an industrialized setting, such as a feed yard, a third person should be watching the situation and be prepared to call for help.

Identifying confined spaces on the farm, such as grain carts, fertilizer tanks, storage bins, etc. can help in thinking through necessary safety practices for working in a specific area.

“No one intentionally touches a hot stove, but it’s possible to stumble, fall and be burned by a hot stove,” Moore says. “Farmers don’t deliberately place themselves in harm’s way. However, they often have to make decisions in a moment. Before you get to that point, think about potential hazards, and determine how to avoid them or how to respond to them. It can greatly reduce injury.”

A number of years ago Moore’s grandfather sternly scolded him for opening the door of a running combine to search for the source of a troublesome squall. A couple years later, his grandfather did the same thing, nearly losing three fingers trying to troubleshoot a drive belt.

“It’s not that we don’t know what we should and shouldn’t do,” Moore says. “On the farm, we often make decisions based on what we think we can do, underestimating the hazards of the situation.”

One overlooked element of safety planning may be determining how quickly a rescue team can reach an injured person, and whether or not they’ll have

the necessary equipment to extract them from a life-threatening situation.

“In rural areas, having a rescue team on standby is usually not feasible,” Moore says. “Rescue help could be miles away. That makes it even more important to be extremely careful in a confined space.”

The average age of U.S. farmers – 58 years – adds another hazardous element to working in confined spaces. At that age, reflexes, strength and overall health have typically declined.

“Most of us have the mindset that these kinds of incidents only happen to the other guy,” Moore says. “Anyone who frequently takes a risk and avoids injury is just practicing for the time when it kills them. Just because you haven’t had a fatal car wreck after 30 years of driving doesn’t mean you can’t have one after 31 years.

Moore adds “Taking risky chances is like the statistics in working with electricity. In the United States one worker is killed everyday from electricity. It always happens to the other guy. Today you are not the other guy but tomorrow you may well be THE OTHER GUY!”

Additional OSHA confined space information is available at

<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/confinedspaces/>.

OSHA’s self-inspection confined workspace checklist can be found at <http://www.osha-record-keeping.com/index.php/78-osha-self-inspection/109-self-inspection-checklist-entering-confined-work-space>.