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PERSONAL PROTECTIVE GEAR

Farmers don't always have the luxury of reengineering a risky task or hiring someone to help complete it.

One thing they can do to reduce risk of injury or death is use appropriate protective equipment, from head to toe.

"Think of your eyes, ears, lungs, feet and every other body part exposed to risk when you're involved in a task," Carolyn Sheridan, Clinical Director at AgriSafe Network, says. "Then identify devices necessary to protect yourself from the hazards related to that activity."

Personal Protect Equipment (PPE) encompasses a wide range of products for farmers, who are exposed to many different types of work-related hazards.

Sheridan notes that the wide range of risks farmers face every day – grain handling, airborne mold, livestock, faulty equipment, etc. – may make the job of effectively protecting themselves seem overwhelming. However, mentally walking through the steps involved in each particular task can help zero in on the hazards it presents.

"For instance, if you plan to work cattle on a ranch, what kind of protection do you need for that job?" Sheridan says. "Of course you need boots, but also consider whether or not those boots would protect you if you were stepped on."

Other aspects to review for that same task include whether protection is needed for the head, face and hands. Depending on weather conditions, protective gear could include a warm hat, gloves designed for frigid temperatures and sun screen to protect the face.

"Use that same exercise when you think about cleaning a barn, moving hay or working outside all day," Sheridan says. "What kinds of hazards are involved and how can you prepare to protect yourself from injury?"

Working through the steps of a specific task should also include consideration of any other person(s) involved in the task who may be subject to injury and what protective equipment they may require. Everyone involved in the work should be aware of necessary and available equipment and know how to access and use it.

“In addition to identifying the appropriate equipment for a specific task, farmers should make sure selected gear meets standards set by NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health),” Sheridan says. “Don’t settle for the cheapest device, because it may not offer adequate protection or may not fit properly. Look for and purchase gear that meets approved standards.”

NIOSH ([osap.org](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/)), a division of the Center for Disease Control, is a federal agency responsible for conducting research and making recommendations for the prevention of work-related injury and illness. A list of NIOSH-approved personal protective equipment is available at <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/ppe/>. Approved respirators, which are a critical part of protecting the respiratory system, are included in that list. For all NIOSH-approved equipment, NIOSH emblems and printed materials related to effective use of the equipment are included with its purchase.

PPE should also fit well. Otherwise, protection is compromised. If products aren’t available locally, they may be obtainable through a catalog or online. Recommended suppliers include [gemplers.com](https://www.gemplers.com) and [grainger.com](https://www.grainger.com).

Once the appropriate gear has been acquired, it should be located where it’s convenient to use. That location could include a vehicle or building. The main idea is to make it as convenient as possible to access when it’s time to use it.

“Where ever it’s stored, it should be in an enclosed container such as a weaved bag or box with ventilation holes, to prevent mold growth on damp PPE. Things like respirators should not be hanging on a rear view mirror,” Sheridan says. “It can also be helpful to have two of the same item if they need to be used in different areas or vehicles. Having a second piece of protective gear on hand is also helpful if one is damaged or lost. By keeping extras on hand, there’s no excuse for not using it.”

Items such as reusable respirators should be cleaned after each use and frequently washed to ensure that they’re free of dust or product when they’re used.

Chemical labels specify the types of protective equipment required for chemical application. At the least, farmers should wear goggles and unlined chemical gloves to handle chemical products. Additional chemical safety gear includes chemical-resistant aprons and face shields. Protective suits are also available.

Some tasks – such as working with anhydrous ammonia – may require use of unvented goggles and gloves resistant to ammonia and insulated against the cold. In handling anhydrous ammonia, law requires the use of nurse tanks that carry 5- gallons of clean water in case there’s a need to flush eyes or skin.

Farmers looking for additional information about PPE will find varied local resources. Health care providers and local Extension offices are among the resources that can assist with PPE questions.

AgriSafe Network ([agrisafe.org](https://www.agrisafe.org)) has many resources that are helpful in identifying which type of PPE is appropriate to a task.

“One of the reasons PPE may not be top-of-mind in the ag community is that we don’t often hear about injuries related to failure to use proper protective equipment,” Sheridan says. “News reports are common for major incidents, such as fatal tractor accidents or loss of limbs. But the long term health consequences of chronic lung disease, permanent hearing loss and compromised eye sight often go unnoticed.

“You don’t hear about the three out of four brothers who lost their hearing and suffered significant loss of communication as a result,” Sheridan adds. “Chronic long term health issues related to farming can be devastating to families. Finding and using the proper PPE doesn’t have to be complicated. Think about your total health and acquire the equipment to protect it.”

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