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FARMERS PARTNER WITH RURAL FIREFIGHTERS

How RF-DASH is helping save lives in rural America.

Those working in agriculture are between 8 and 10 times more likely to die on the job than the average U.S. worker. In addition to the devastating consequences of these incidents for farmers and farm workers, the grim statistics also impact local firefighters and Emergency Management Systems (EMS) personnel.

Since 2016, Casper Bendixsen, Ph.D., Director of National Farm Medicine Center, and his team of agricultural safety colleagues have been working to assist farmers and farm managers partner with rural firefighters and EMS to engage in safety education and training designed to help reduce the overall number of farm injuries and fatalities.

The concept for the partnership grew out of the response Bendixsen received in an ag safety survey.

“We asked farmers who they trust and spend time with, who they consult for friendly advice about making changes on their operation,” Bendixsen says. “They told us their trusted sources included other farmers and farm families, fire fighters and EMS personnel.”

As Bendixsen looked more closely at the relationship between farmers and these public servants, he recognized that 70% of rural volunteer firefighters and EMS staff are often farmers. While that statistic is changing as family farms grow larger and the number of farmers declines, a unique connection and confidence between these entities remains.

“After recognizing this unique relationship, we began examining how we might leverage the esteem farmers had for firefighters and EMS personnel to positively impact farm safety

practices,” Bendixsen says. “From those efforts, we developed RF-DASH, Rural Firefighters Delivering Agricultural Safety and Health.”

The RF-DASH program consists of a five-part classroom and hands-on training with easy to use, free tools. Through the program, which is offered through local firefighter and EMS departments, farmers learn how they can plan a response to an emergency before it occurs. Instructions for how to map farms with the tools at www.FarmMAPPER.com is included in the program.

Pre-planning and mapping a farm allow emergency responders access to a bird’s eye view of the property. That information is invaluable in helping identify the location of hazardous resources on that specific farm, how to quickly assess the elements of a proper and effective response and how to reduce damage and loss of life or property during the response.

“We don’t ask farmers to engage in major preplanning,” Bendixsen says. “The kind of planning a major factory undertakes is far more complex than what’s found on a farm. A key part of RF-DASH preplanning involves farmers building rapport with their local firefighters and EMS and having conversations about any unique aspects or hazards of their farm.”

As with any industry or business, RF-DASH emphasizes that prevention is the most effective approach to managing farm injuries and fatalities. The program’s secure mobile friendly third-party tool, www.saferfarm.org, is not connected to OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) or insurance company data.

Farm Hazard Analysis, accomplished through use of the tools at Saferfarm.org, helps farmers learn to recognize and reduce common farm hazards. The program’s Farm First Aid module trains bystanders about immediate response options to an emergency while waiting for first responders. This standard first aid course is tailored to the farm environment and emphasizes injury prevention knowledge.

The program also encourages farmers to consider the “agents of injury” found on their farm. The top three causes of fatal ag injuries are related to tractors/machinery, motor vehicles (including ATVs) and drowning. Top causes of non-fatal ag injuries include falls, animals and machinery/vehicles.

RF-DASH also aims to reduce potential for injury to firefighters and EMS personnel during response to an on-farm emergency. Allowing these entities to become more familiar with an individual farm helps promote the overall health and safety of each farm and the rural community.

“Through the RF-DASH partnership, firefighters and EMS can customize their emergency response to each farm,” Bendixsen says. “When farmers and firefighters talk to each other, both are more prepared to respond to an on-farm emergency.”

RF-DASH trained responders are respectful and appreciative of a farmer’s time. Just two hours of time are required to assess a farm for safety. Details about each farm are secure and are not shared with anyone other than the fire/EMS departments.

When emergency response is well thought out, farmers, firefighters and EMS departments benefit by reducing potential for serious and/or life-threatening injuries to occur for all those involved in an emergency and/or response. When emergency incidents decrease, the risk of life and property loss for all three entities decreases, too.

Currently, RF-DASH has been featured in multiple U.S. and Canadian media sources, including dairy and beef industry publications. More than 70 firefighters/EMS have been

trained as trainers in WI, MN, NY, MA, OH, UT, ID, WA, NE, and PA. New trainers are working to train dozens more and have begun making their own RF-DASH presentations.

RF-DASH fits well with many National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards, specifically the NFPA 1300 standard on Community Risk Assessment and Community Risk Reduction Plan Development. The program is helping combat agriculture's high rate of injury, with an average of 167 workers per day injured on farms. It also eases the burden on farm safety consultants, who are too few in number to have an effective impact on all U.S. farmers.

RF-DASH is funded by the Upper Midwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center (UMASH) through a cooperative agreement from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

"We're in our fifth year of funding in 2021," Bendixsen says. "Our hope is that we'll secure another five-year funding grant to expand training to include rescue training. Grain bin rescues, grain entrapment, and grain handling equipment entanglements are common sources of farm injury and fatality. We believe communities are ready for grain handling prevention education. We hope to include this training in future RF-DASH training programs.

There are fire departments who really care about their community and want to protect people from being injured," Bendixsen adds. "Think about helping keep them from being injured if they have to come to your farm."

Bendixsen encourages farmers to consider how they can help prevent the need for an emergency rescue. Often, both the victim and the rescuer become endangered.

"By taking this initiative to help prevent something from happening to you, your family or your workers, you're also preventing the risk taken by rescuers in your community."

"We extend a major thank you to my research team and to the Upper Midwest Ag Safety and Health Center out of the University of Minnesota and to the staff at the National Farm Medicine Center," Bendixsen says. "We've grown this over multiple years and we're happy to see it taken root in some fire departments. There are some fire departments who are truly just running with it. That's the kind of thing that's rewarding, when you see an idea come to fruition and people take it and make it their own."

For additional information, contact Casper Bendixsen at BENDIXSEN.CASPER@marshfieldresearch.com or go to www.RFDASH.org.

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