



THINK SAFETY



Special risks for women in ag

By **MARY PAT HOAG**
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KEARNEY — Agricultural women are up to the task, but sometimes the task is difficult to do because of their stature and strength.

Take squeeze chute levers; “super-sized” tractors with a woman unable to reach the foot controls; tools with too large of a grip and large face masks.

“Most farm equipment is sized and designed for men,” said Ellen Duysen, an outreach specialist with the University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Public Health Central States Center for Agricultural Safety & Health in Omaha.

She added that “most safety education for the agricultural population is often aimed at men.”

Women serve in hundreds of crop and livestock roles in ag operations.

Duysen said nearly 300,000 women serve as principal operators on 62.7 million acres of farm and ranch land, accounting for \$12.9 billion in farm products, according to a 2012 USDA survey.

She encourages agricultural women to understand the factors that relate to their health and safety.

She and Sharri Nielsen recently conducted a workshop titled “Taking Charge of Your Health: Women Working in Agriculture” at the 31st annual Nebraska Women in Agriculture conference in Kearney. Nielsen is a Nebraska Extension educator based in Minden.

Duysen urged the audience to “make sure your physician knows what you do for a living” as there are numerous occupational hazards related to farming and ranching. Some — such as pregnancy-related risks — pertain to women.

Women — as well as men — are exposed to a multitude of biologic, chemical, physical and mechanical agents while performing farm tasks on a regular basis, she said.

The safety and health issues, Duysen said, include:

Chronic bronchitis; hearing loss; cancer risk; fatigue; depression; acute and chronic pesticide exposures; livestock-related injuries; musculoskeletal injuries (like carpal tunnel syndrome); zoonotic transmission (bacteria and viruses transmitted from animal to



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ELLEN DUYSEN (right), with the University of Nebraska Medical Center, demonstrates the correct way to wear a personal protective device to Diane Stutterheim of Prairie View, Kan.

human); and slips, trips and falls.

And the number one cause of farm community accidents is “tractor roll-overs — still,” Duysen said.

A woman may ignore her personal health, safety and overall well-being, she said.

“As women, we take on a lot of the (farm) burden,” she said. Stressors may include serving multiple roles (wife, mother and farmer); working off the farm; isolation and living with multiple risks on a daily basis.

Compounding the situation is a lack of mental health providers in rural areas, Duysen said.

Respiratory-related problems are a major concern.

“Farming is bad for the lungs,” said Duysen, adding that farmers have a high rate of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Wear a mask in any dusty situation.

Choose the right mask for the ag task, and “remember that one size doesn’t fit all,” Duysen said. “Wearing an ill-fitting mask may be worse than

wearing none at all,” she said. “Never pinch the nose of the mask.”

Look for the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) “N” approval rating on personal protective equipment (PPE), such as two-strap and half-mask purifying respirators.

There are now PPEs on the market designed for women, as well as YouTube videos showing how to correctly wear the mask.

When dressing for farm work, think head-to-toe protection: body (including lungs), head, eyes, ears and feet. Think of such risks as flying objects, grain and swine dust, mold, noise and sun, she said.

Also during the workshop, Duysen served a warning to families that rely on well water for their drinking water: Don’t drink any more well water until it’s tested.

Nielsen addressed ergonomics, “fitting the tools you’re using to the work.”

Consider the ergonomics of a situation. By working ergonomically, a

person may prevent injury, be more productive and “hopefully” reduce health care costs, she said.

Women have smaller hands and may need to use their larger muscles when completing a task.

“Make sure the tool fits your hand,” Nielsen said. “Get the tool that works for you.”

In the case of power grips, the width should be 1 3/4 to 3 3/4 inches. And use ergonomically correct tools whenever possible, such as a special snow shovel.

Ag-related work often involves repetitive tasks. “Even light lifting may lead to spinal injury and resultant pain,” she said.

She offered these lifting tips: Use your legs to lift. Keep the object close to your body. Loads should be as light and compact as possible. In some instances, divide the items between two (or more) containers.

Don’t twist your trunk while lifting an object. Also, don’t reach forward to lift an item. Alternate between heavy and light work.

When seated at a work station, such as a computer desk, the head should be aligned with the shoulders. The neck should not bend forward. Keep hips, knees and ankles at a 90-degree angle with feet squarely on the floor.

Adjust the computer screen to eye level or slightly lower. Use wrist protection.

Stretching is another key component to safety and health. Practice a daily stretching routine to prevent or reduce pain.

“Work smarter, not harder,” she said.

Nielsen, who is involved with Nebraska AgrAbility, recommends its resources. The program, a partnership of extension and Easter Seals Nebraska, helps individuals overcome barriers to continue their agricultural work.

Annually, more than 3,000 Nebraskans working in agriculture experience injuries that limit their ability to perform essential work tasks, according to AgrAbility. These disabilities may include illness, disease, decreased vision or hearing, or loss of strength.

Want to learn more?

Visit unmc.edu/publichealth/cscash, agrability.unl.edu and agrisafe.org. The latter offers an Ag Health Risk Assessment Tool.

Be aware of train presence



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PAT LEAHY reads details of train collisions that occurred in Nebraska in recent years. One involved a tractor pulling an irrigation pivot across tracks.

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KEARNEY — No doubt, at some point, you’ve sailed over railroad tracks at an unmarked crossing.

Only then — on the other side — did you hold your breath and realize that you didn’t look both ways for a train.

It could have been a coal train weighing from 18 to 20 tons, the equivalent of Chevy Malibus stretched for 35 miles. A train versus a vehicle is about a 4,000:1 weight ratio. The train crushes a car like a car crushes a can.

That information was provided by Pat Leahy of Cozad, a 39-year employee of the Union Pacific. He volunteers his time to present free safety programs that promote public awareness about railroad safety through Operation Lifesaver.

The non-profit international continuing education program — which dates to the 1970s — is designed to end collisions, deaths and injuries where roadways cross railroad tracks and on railroad rights-of-way.

Leahy likened a train hitting a vehicle to a person smashing an egg on a counter: crush one side, rotate, crush, rotate, crush.

Every three hours someone in the U.S. is struck by a train, whether a motorist or pedestrian, Leahy said.

In 2014, there were 36 people involved in railroad train collisions in Nebraska, resulting in five fatalities. Every week that year, about 16 people were killed by trains nationwide, according to federal government data.

“When approaching tracks, always

expect a train,” said Leahy, a luncheon speaker at the recent Women in Agriculture conference in Kearney.

Only one in four railroad crossings in Nebraska is marked with a warning device, Leahy said. Multiple tracks mean multiple trains.

Sometimes a motorist drives around the guard rails and is stuck on the tracks. “You can’t beat a train; you

can’t out-drive a train; you cannot out-think a train,” he said.

If a vehicle is hit, Leahy advises to get away from the tracks and run toward the train to avoid getting hit by debris.

If the crossing arms land on a vehicle, take the gates with you. They will snap off.

Every railroad crossing in the state has an identification number that can be

used when reporting a problem or an emergency. Call the number posted on the sign: 800-848-8715.

Leahy told of a Kearney-area accident where a 60-car train sliced through a grain truck in the blink of an eye.

In another case, Leahy said a 5-year-old boy was seen around railroad tracks. Fortunately, he was reported and removed from the track area before a train passed through. And what was in his hand? Pennies that he wanted smashed by the train.

Leahy presented a video that depicted actual fatal train collisions. It concluded with “Don’t let it be your life.”

One way to prevent a collision with a train is to slow down at crossings. “We’re always in a hurry,” Leahy said.

Want to learn more?

Visit www.nebraskaoil.org.



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