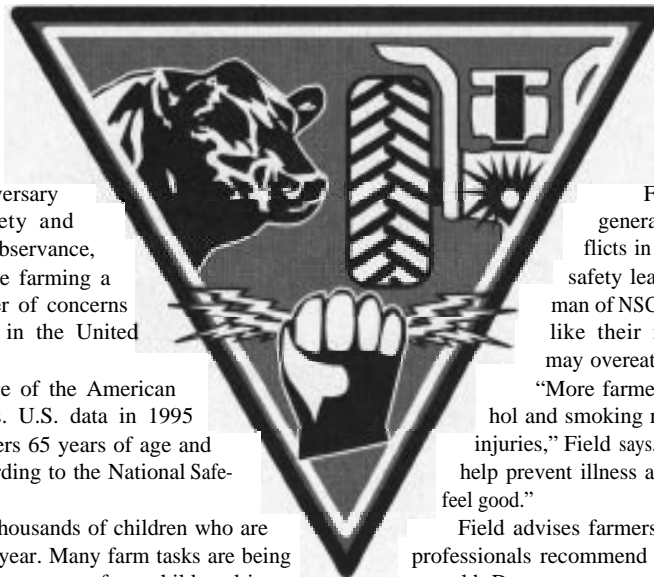


# Focus on the Future

## *Practice Safety and Health Today*



**T**his year marks the 53rd anniversary of the National Farm Safety and Health Week. Throughout this observance, progress has been made to make farming a safer occupation. Still, a number of concerns remain for the oldest industry in the United States.

For example, the average age of the American farmer is approaching 55 years. U.S. data in 1995 showed the No. 1 killer of farmers 65 years of age and over was tractor overturns, according to the National Safety Council (NSC).

Even more alarming are the thousands of children who are injured and killed on farms each year. Many farm tasks are being performed by youngsters. The average age for a child to drive a tractor on a farm road is 12 years. Appropriate protective measures should be taken when a farm task involves children.

Safety and health education can play an important role in reducing farm accidents. Be a role model—follow safe practices on your farm or ranch and emphasize their importance to your family members and employees.

### **Stress Reduction Can Prevent Injuries**

Worrying about finances, the weather or personal problems while operating powerful farm equipment puts farmers at risk. This is especially true if a farmer loses his or her concentration on the task at hand or makes hasty decisions in anger, say Extension safety specialists.

Anything you can do to reduce stress—both physical and mental—will help reduce the likelihood of an injury or illness. Numerous professionals and organizations are available to help you handle stress.

Keep communication lines open. If you are concerned about finances or farming and ranching options, talk with a trusted banker or financial consultant. You don't have to share all the details, just some concerns. Most importantly, talk with your family.

Take the situation in west Texas, for example. Plagued by one of the worst droughts in recent times, farmers and ranchers are deeply troubled by the economic outlook for their crops and livestock. Steve Gaylord, Extension agent in Plainview, Texas, says some have sought the help of Extension agents and other ag consultants to suggest alternative crops, locate hay and feed, and to serve as a sounding board. "This has helped them restore some sense of control over the situation," Gaylord says.

Farmers face the same stresses as the general population (too many choices, conflicts in values), says William Field, Extension safety leader at Purdue University, and chairman of NSC's Agricultural Safety Division. And, like their non-farming counterparts, farmers may overeat or turn to alcohol when stressed.

"More farmers die from unhealthy diets, or alcohol and smoking related illness, than from actual farm injuries," Field says. "Farmers who watch their diets can help prevent illness and make better decisions because they feel good."

Field advises farmers to get a physical. Most health care professionals recommend annual physicals for people over 40 years old. Doctors can prevent illness and susceptibility to injuries. Even so, many farmers do not go to doctors until they need them in a crisis. Why? Many farm families are under-insured. Field points out, however, that farmers generally save money in the long-run by going for preventive care. Problems that go undiagnosed may develop into physically-disabling conditions.

Another way to avoid potential stress is to approach tasks and problems early with an "I can" and an "I care" attitude. Gaylord says that if you approach a task or problem doubting the effectiveness of the results, you will not be motivated to do a good job. You must develop positive self-esteem.

Safety specialists also recommend that farmers and ranchers take a vacation or short break from their work. "Many farmers don't feel comfortable with getting away. They think the farm cannot run without them. But it helps to get away to get a fresh perspective," Field says. For this reason, many universities offer tours to different places around the world. Field says agricultural tours can give you a new perspective on your own situation.

Gaylord agrees that farmers need to get away, even if it's for a weekend. Even a day seminar can help you get out of your normal routine, relieve some tension and clear the mind. Quality of time spent by oneself, with family or on business far outweighs quantity of time.

"You should sit down and really analyze your farming operation, and consider all options available," Gaylord says. He also points out that most farmers know when to "let up" physically, but they may not recognize how mental strain can take its toll.

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**Stress Reduction Tips**

- Share concerns or troubles with a trusted friend, clergyman or business consultant.
- Get involved in church, school or community organizations. They can help expand your sense of purpose and self esteem.
- Approach tasks and problems with an "I can" and an "I care" attitude.
- Set priorities; do important tasks first.
- Set realistic goals for you and your family, land and livestock.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Take a course in stress reduction.
- Take quality time for yourself and your family,

**Child Safety: Practice What You Preach**

Sometime in our life, we have either allowed a child to ride on a tractor with us or we were the extra passenger as a kid. Remember clenching that fender as Dad's tractor bumped over that ditch?

While we invest in infant seats or make sure our kids are buckled up in the car, we don't always apply the same precautions to farm equipment. The results can be tragic. The most common cause of farm fatalities result from tractor run overs and rollovers.

It's frequently reported that about 300 children die each year from farm-related accidents. William Field of Purdue University reports that of 460 child fatality studies on farms in Wisconsin and Indiana, 50 percent were associated with tractors.

Each year about one-third of farm injuries involve children who are visiting a relative's or friend's farm, says Barbara Lee, director of the Children's Safety Network of the National Farm Medicine Center, Marshfield, Wis. She says a small percentage of grandparents may use older farming practices and allow grandchildren to drive or ride along on the tractor.

When asked how old a child should be before learning how to operate a tractor, Lee says, "Operating a tractor requires the same physical and cognitive skills as operating an automobile. Children are not ready until they are 16 years old. From a safety perspective, there also is no justification for having extra riders. Adults must be firm and make children understand that tractors are meant for work, not play."

Many farm-related tragedies involving children can be prevented. One important way is for parents to practice safe farming themselves.

"Children mimic their parents. That's why parents need to be good role models," says Shari Burgus, director of program services with Farm Safety 4 Just Kids, Earlham, Iowa.

This non-profit organization has more than 40 local chapters throughout North America and conducts safety education activities for both adults and children.

"We encourage entire families to attend our programs," says Burgus, adding that when families view a safety demonstration together, they can talk about it on the way home. Parents can answer children's questions related to their own farm.

Lary Piercy, Extension safety specialist at the University of Kentucky, agrees that families should discuss safety issues. He gives the

example of focus groups in Kentucky where parents acknowledged the risks involved with children working on the farm. Still, many of the parents said they needed their kids to work to ease financial pressures. Others felt that assigning chores to children helped convey a strong work ethic and other positive social behavior.

Piercy advises parents to talk to each other and to think about age-appropriate tasks for their children. "Parents must remember that while their kids can be mature most of the time, they can quickly revert to child-like behavior. We tend to overestimate our children's ability to handle equipment," he says.

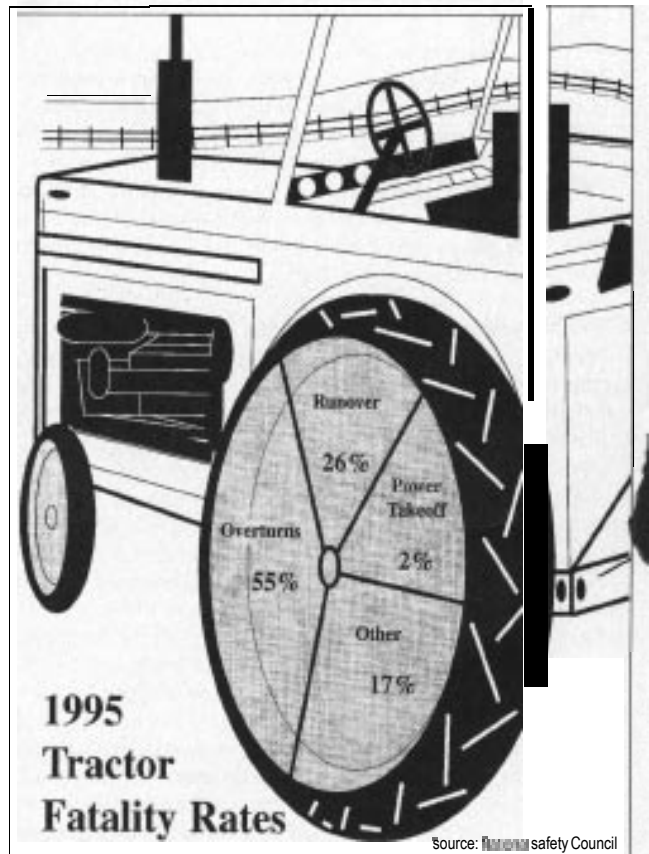
For further information on agriculture safety, contact these sources:

Children's Safety Network  
National Farm Medicine Center  
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There were 418 tractor-related deaths on farms nation wide in 1995.