

Still Safe

Why aging ranchers and those who employ older workers on their place should take a fresh look at how their abilities can be safely maximized while reducing the potential for injury.

by *Sharla Ishmael*

Getting older stinks! There is no way around it for any of us. The wisdom gained from experience doesn't do much to ease the aches and pains earned by years of hauling hay and helping heifers. Brooding on all the things you can't do anymore — or at least do as easily — isn't going to help. However, an honest look at yourself (or your older family members and employees) and how any physical ailments might affect your work and the safety of everyone around is a smart thing to do — even if it bruises the old ego a bit.

For example, consider the farmer/rancher who refused to admit his eyesight wasn't as good as it needed to be to drive the tractor anymore. It took running into the side of the barn for him to admit he was not only putting his own safety at risk, but also anyone who crossed his path.

What about the fellow whose age and chronic health problems caused him to have less ability to feel heat/cold and pain in his legs? He welded in the shop anyway and caught himself on fire before he realized the sparks were hitting his legs. Or even the rancher's wife, who was bottle-feeding baby calves and had to walk across the icy driveway to the barn. She slipped, and due to her osteoporosis, broke a hip.

According to Mark Jansen, vice president of safety and health for the Zenith Insurance Co., older workers tend to have fewer accidents. But when they do have accidents, they tend to be more severe than those of younger workers, and their recovery time is much longer. Jansen recently spoke at the Be Safe, Be Profitable agricultural worker safety conference in Dallas on the impact of aging agriculture workers.

On the bright side, he explained that older workers tend to engage in less risky activities, do less multi-tasking and work more slowly with greater concentration. However, factors such as prior injuries, joint and bone diseases, hearing loss, reduced vision, chronic diseases

like diabetes or even the side effects of prescription and over-the-counter drugs can exacerbate the accidents and recovery that older workers encounter.

A fall may cause a fracture. A slower response time may result in a bad kick from a cow or horse that he used to be quick enough to avoid. To add insult to injury, the older rancher may need an extended time in the hospital and/or rehab to recover, whereas the younger person might visit an emergency room (ER) and go home the same day.

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Health factors into safety

Jansen said some of the common effects of age that employers ought to consider when assigning tasks or designing work spaces and processes are muscle loss, increased stiffness and less flexibility, vision loss, hearing loss, decreased response time — especially with hand and foot coordination, slower decision-making, reduced lung capacity, less sensitivity to pain, increased sensitivity to temperatures and chronic illness like cataracts and arthritis. With the average age of ranchers now at 58, according to the 2007 Ag Census, these are all very common problems among beef producers.

At the safety conference, co-organized by the Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America and the National Institute for Occupational Safety Health, Rickey Langley specifically addressed injuries associated with livestock handling. While the tractor is still the No. 1 "killer" on farms and ranchers,



PHOTO BY LAURA NELSON

the No. 7 cause of fatal injuries is animals.

Of course, cattle being among the largest of production animals, they are associated with the most injuries and fatalities. Did you know that one out of two attacks (mauling) by large bulls are fatal? Langley reported that bulls make up about 2% of the population, but are responsible for about 50% of fatalities due to animals. Those kinds of numbers make it a lot easier to ship old "Ornery" rather than keep him around one more year.

In terms of injuries caused by animals, the most common injuries associated with cattle production are fractures — particularly a problem for the elderly considering a fracture may wind up costing that person the ability to live independently. As far as horses go, Langley noted that 38% of injuries are inflicted on people standing beside the horse rather than riding it.

Then think about the facilities and equipment that you use to handle your cattle. An older worker with balance problems might be more likely to fall from a dirty or wet walkway when pushing cattle through the chute or he might not be fast enough to be the catcher on that old headgate anymore. You can either upgrade to equipment that works properly, or you can reassign that worker to another job. Where could his wisdom and experience be better used?

Weather affects older workers faster

Of course everybody involved in ranching understands how important the weather is, but did you realize that both the elderly and children are more susceptible to extremes of heat or cold? People with chronic medical conditions also fall into that category. Larry

Jackson spoke about heat-related illnesses at the conference.

If you look at agriculture as a whole, including foresting, fishing and hunting, Jackson said there are 17,800 heat-related illnesses among workers on an annual basis, including 670 deaths. Jackson pointed out that heat can affect workers in subtle ways, as well as the obvious. For example, someone who is heat-stressed may make poorer decisions than normal, have sweaty and therefore slippery hands, fogged glasses, lightheadedness, etc.

On the flip side, older workers may have medical conditions that cause decreased feeling in the extremities. That means someone working out in winter, breaking ice on water tanks as an example, might not realize just how badly his hands are being affected by exposure to the weather because he can't feel it like a healthier person.

Repetitive injuries and back problems

Most of the fellows down at the coffee shop you know probably have back problems. It is documented that musculoskeletal disorders are common in agriculture due to the labor intensity required. One study found that chronic back

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pain was identified in 26% of farmers and ranchers and increased with age and number of years worked.

While easy to dismiss as "part of the job," health officials point out these types of injuries are largely preventable in the first place. Using proper lifting technique and tools fitted for a particular task can help ranchers avoid chronic pain or aggravation of old injuries.

The National Ag Safety Database suggests the following tips to save your back:

- ▶ Add a step with non-slip material to machinery to help with getting on and off safely.
- ▶ Install a suspension seat or a seat cushion with lumbar support and adjustable arm

rests to your tractor to reduce stress and pressure on your lower back.

- ▶ Automatic hitching devices and gate openers reduce frequency of getting in and out of vehicles/machinery.
- ▶ Additional mirrors can be added so you don't have to twist your back to look behind.
- ▶ Long-handled tools to avoid bending.
- ▶ Handle extenders improve leverage.
- ▶ Add a gate wheel to the end of a sagging gate so it's easy to roll rather than lift.

Other simple modifications can be made around the ranch, including little things like replacing knobs on cabinets with levers so someone with arthritis doesn't struggle to open it. In areas where the elevation changes, consider painting it with high-contrast colors so someone with vision problems can see the change better and not stumble. In the old bathroom, of course, a higher toilet seat and grab bars installed on the walls will make life much easier for any older person.

Vision changes can be accommodated by adding lighting to dark areas, reducing glare on computer screens, providing magnifying glasses if necessary and limiting

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driving to daytime hours. To prevent further hearing loss, you can provide protection, but remember that changes in hearing include the fact that both upper and lower frequencies disappear, and the person may have trouble understanding speech.

So, if there are important instructions to be given to someone with hearing issues, write it down to avoid any confusion, like feeding the wrong thing to the wrong animals.

When training older workers, they may need to go slower with more repetition than younger ones. If training is important to your operation for some reason, you might consider looking for adult education specialists in the Extension service and elsewhere for help.

What about women?

There isn't much documentation about the injuries women in farming and ranching experience. However, common sense tells you that women are generally smaller than men and that most agricultural machinery is made to fit a man. As an example, a woman's legs may have a harder time reaching the pedals, which could cause obvious problems.

Women tend to have less upper-body strength and, therefore, more injuries in that area than men. Depending on the individual, they may not have the strength needed to safely operate some tools or equipment, and all of this is magnified with age.

And, on behalf of all women who have ever worked cattle with a man, let us make it clear once and for all: We cannot read your mind, and ours doesn't work the same way as yours, so don't yell at us. ... Plus, it spooks the cattle, you know.

Ranching IS dangerous

Whatever modifications you can afford and plans you can make that make your ranch a safer place for everyone, whether older or not, is money and time well-spent. Richard Steffen of Southern Illinois University writes that farming/ranching has a fatality rate that ranks it as one of the three most dangerous occupations in the United States, despite making up only 2% of the population.

Jan Klodowski, vice president of Agri Services Agency, also spoke at the ag workers safety conference and pointed out that you are less likely to be injured working in a mine, forestry/logging, or construction than you are working on a dairy farm or cattle ranch.

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She also said, "You can't do much to control feed costs, etc., but you can control injury/accident costs."

Klodowski cited a Penn State study on the cost of agricultural injuries that found a cost of \$29,000 per disability and \$790,000 per fatality.

She also pointed out that if you aren't planning to prevent farm/ranch injuries, you are essentially planning to have farm/ranch injuries. It may just be a cost you can't afford.

