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National Farm Safety and Health Week 2025: "Safety First, Avoid the Worst"

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This year, National Farm Safety and Health Week will be recognized from September 21 to 27, under the theme "Safety First, Avoid the Worst." The theme's message sounds simple, but it carries weight in an industry filled with long hours, hard work, powerful machinery, large animals, and unpredictable environments such as manure storage facilities and stored products like feed and grain.

Farm Safety Week has been officially recognized by U.S. Presidents dating back to 1944, when Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the first proclamation during World War II.

In Wisconsin, the need to recognize this critical time is personal. Our state continues to experience roughly 25 to 40 farm workplace fatalities every year. While it has been many years since we have had a study examining all the non-fatal farming injuries, earlier research suggests that roughly one in five Wisconsin farms experiences a serious injury annually. Around 80% of those cases require medical attention. And yet, nearly every one of these injuries and deaths is preventable.

Safety Isn't Just a Slogan: It's Action

A safety slogan doesn't change much by itself. What matters is how safety shows up in the everyday choices we make on the farm. This includes actions that build safety into daily habits, decisions, and equipment choices. In the world of occupational safety, we often refer to the "safety hierarchy," a framework that reminds us that posting a warning sign or delivering a quick verbal "make sure to be safe out there" messages is only a tiny part of the solution. Real safety means making physical, tangible changes that protect people at the source. So, in the spirit of this year's theme, here are five key actions that go beyond slogans and can help make the farm a safer place this fall and beyond.

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1 | Tractor Rollovers: Stop the Leading Killer

Tractor rollovers remain a common cause of death on Wisconsin farms. These can happen on hillsides, around bunker silos or piles, or even on level ground if you hitch too high. Yet, we have a proven solution: the Rollover Protective Structure, or ROPS.

The key is not just having a ROPS...it's using it properly. Too often, fold-down ROPS aren't locked back in place when equipment returns to the field. And without a seatbelt, even a functioning ROPS can't do its job. If a rollover occurs, you want to stay protected within the survival zone the frame creates. If you have an old ROPS-less tractor that you spend a lot of time on, consider retrofitting it with rollover protection. Or use a different tractor that has ROPS.

The same principle applies to riding mowers and zero-turn lawn tractors for property owners, whether they are in the country or in town. More machines are coming with factory-installed ROPS. But many users fold them down and forget to wear seatbelts. It's a simple fix with life-saving potential.

2 | Light It Up, Mark It Right

Almost every piece of farm equipment finds its way onto a public road at some point. Whether it's a tractor, wagon, combine, forage harvester, or manure spreader, if you're out there with traffic, you need to be seen and clearly marked.

That starts with a clean, visible slow-moving vehicle (SMV) emblem. It should be bright, mounted correctly, and not covered by equipment, mud, or manure. But don't stop there.

Wisconsin state laws on lighting can be confusing, especially when it comes to flashing amber lights. Still, the best practice is clear: equip machines with flashing amber lights that also function as turn signals. If your towing vehicle doesn't have the wiring to power and control the lighting on the implement behind it, invest in portable LED systems, some of which can be remote-controlled. These are widely available online or through your local implement dealer, affordable, and far better than being invisible at 20 miles per hour on a dark road. Remember that a car going 55 mph will close the gap on slow equipment in seconds. For the motorist, hitting a loaded wagon, manure spreader, or other large machine is like hitting a brick wall.

3 | Pre-Harvest Walkarounds: Prevent Fires and Falls

Before the season gets busy, take the time for a full equipment walkaround. Pay special attention to:

- Engine compartments, belts, and hydraulic hoses, as well as other areas where crop debris or dust can start fires. Use a leaf blower or air compressor to clean off equipment at least once a day.
- The condition and presence of guards and shields
- Fire extinguishers: 10-pound ABC dry chemical units are a must. Make sure the pressure gauge shows a working charge
- Steps, ladders, and handholds: keep them clean, in good shape, and easy to access. Getting onto and off farm equipment can be tricky and, at times, dangerous for older operators. Falls from equipment don't often make the news, but they send too many people to the ER every harvest season. It's a small detail that matters more than most people think.

4 | Know the Manual. Train the Team.

If a machine is on your farm, it should have an operator's manual close at hand. Before harvest, go over the key safety features with your crew. For new employees or younger operators, don't assume prior experience. Walk through the manual together and have them show you how to perform key tasks safely.

Whether they're hauling silage, operating a chopper, or unloading grain, they should be able to explain and demonstrate the correct and safe procedures before they start the job. Investing time in training now prevents major injuries later. If there is a language barrier, consider identifying one or more bilingual employees who can assist in taking on some of the responsibilities to support safety education. Several apps are also available to help with text translation.

5 | Protect the Next Generation

Children who live and sometimes work on farms are still at high risk. We continue to see tragic incidents where kids are backed over, run over, or drown in ponds and manure storage facilities. Toddlers and young children under five are especially vulnerable.

Ensure play areas are fenced, located out of traffic routes, and kept a safe distance from heavy machinery and farm animals. Plan family routines that keep kids supervised during after-school hours, and keep all equipment keys out of reach. These simple ideas may look obvious, but they can help families with young children avert tragedy and the life-altering outcomes of a child injury.

More Resources, More Support

National Farm Safety and Health Week is a reminder to take action, not just look back. Whether you're running a small family farm or a large operation with a full crew, there are resources ready for you. The Farm Management Topic Hub at the University of Wisconsin–Madison's Division of Extension offers free materials on equipment safety, worker health, and more. You can also find information on statewide Youth Tractor Safety Programs and guidance for employers training new workers.

AT Spotlight: Automatic Tractor Hitch

Farm work often involves heavy lifting and repetitive tasks that can lead to injury. An automatic tractor hitch helps reduce those risks by allowing implements to be attached quickly and safely—without climbing down or manually aligning parts. It's a simple upgrade that supports both efficiency and safety, especially for farmers with mobility challenges.



Join us for a Neighbor-to-Neighbor gathering, in-person or online!



You're invited!

Neighbor-to-Neighbor Networking Event



Tues, Oct 28th
9:30-11:30am
575 100th Ave
Amery, WI 54001
RSVP: go.wisc.edu/9p1s7a

AgrAbility of Wisconsin invites you to connect with fellow farmers and community members at one of our upcoming Neighbor-to-Neighbor meetings. Whether you prefer to join us on the farm or from the comfort of your home, these events offer a chance to share experiences, explore assistive technology, and discover practical ways to make farming more accessible and sustainable.



You're invited!

Neighbor-to-Neighbor Virtual Networking Events



November 19th, 12:00-12:45pm
December 11th, 6:00-6:45pm
January 14th, 12:00-12:45pm
February 19th, 6:00-6:45pm
RSVP: go.wisc.edu/s138qq

Both events are free to attend! RSVP is appreciated for the in-person event, but not required. Registration is required for the virtual events to receive the connection information. Participants will be able to join the virtual meetings either via internet or by dialing on by phone.



We've Moved!

AgrAbility of Wisconsin

We've Moved (Just the Mail)!

Our mailing address has changed, but our programs and services remain the same! Please update your records and send future correspondence to our new location.

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Give Tools a Second Life – Support Wisconsin Farmers

Do you have farm tools or equipment you no longer use? Consider donating them to the Agricultural Equipment Exchange through Easterseals Wisconsin. This program connects farmers with disabilities to the tools they need to keep working safely and independently. Right now, donated items are limited—your unused equipment could make a big difference in someone's life. Help us grow the exchange and support Wisconsin agriculture!

If you have questions, email Melba at mbrown@eastersealswisconsin.com or call Jeff at 608-279-9436.



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