

Safety Watch: Youth groups encourage farmer safety

By Brandi Janssen
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Washington County, Iowa 4-Her Sophie Bell delivers safety materials to Scott Pemberton during the 2015 harvest.

Photo courtesy of Washington County 4-H

Harvest time means long hours in the field and on the road. With modern, comfortable cabs and lighting on equipment, a person can work all day and long into the night if the weather holds out.

In 2010, the 4-H group in Washington County, Iowa, thought about the long hours farmers work each fall and started a new project, “Stay Safe, Take a Break.” The group got a grant from a local corporate sponsor to purchase bags of snacks, safety information and other giveaways.

In small groups, they traveled around the county looking for people working in the fields. They pulled into the field, asked folks to get out of their grain trucks and combines, and delivered the bags.

4-H leader Amy Green says the activity has been a success, growing every year.

While local farmers get the enjoyable experience of meeting and talking with the 4-H kids in their community, they also get an important message about staying safe during harvest. Research in the U.S., Europe, Canada and Australia has consistently linked fatigue with farm-related incidents and injuries. Researchers in Saskatchewan, Canada, found farmers tend to be particularly sleep deprived during peak production times.

In addition, the monotony of spending long hours harvesting in the field can result in the same kind of “driver

fatigue” experienced by long-haul truckers.

Dennis Murphy, PhD, retired professor and Extension safety specialist at Penn State University, recommends taking a 10-15 minute break every couple hours while spending long days on a tractor or combine.

Green does her part to make sure the 4-H members are well versed in safe procedures in the field as well.

“I do coach them on the safety of entering fields or work areas with farm equipment, on how to stay a safe distance away and never assume that they’ll be seen,” she says.

The 4-H members also come in with a few talking points for the farmers. “Their script is pretty minimal, but they know to introduce themselves as a 4-Her, and to remind them to be safe during harvest and take needed breaks,” Green says. “Also, to thank them for their important work.”

The interruptions do seem to provide farmers a few minutes of down time. Green reports “when we drive away, their equipment usually doesn’t move for a while as they sort through the goodies and do exactly what we hoped — they take a break to help rejuvenate and stay safe.

The bags include snacks and bottled water, but also some important safety gear and information. These include earplugs to prevent hearing loss, NIOSH-approved dust masks, and laminated signs that have emergency contact information that can be kept or displayed in a cab.

This fall, with support from Iowa’s Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH), the “Stay Safe, Take a Break” project is going statewide. Twenty 4-H and FFA chapters across Iowa have signed on to distribute nearly 2,000 bags to farmers this harvest season. I-CASH supplied safety materials, including hearing protection, disposable N95 masks, information about equipment vibration, hearing loss and roadway safety. I-CASH also sent small packs of bandages and a magnet reminding farmers to check in with family members while working alone. The youth groups will find additional items, such as snacks and water, to round out the bags.

The project is a win-win for farmers and 4-Hers. The farmers take a break from the long workday and receive snacks and injury prevention tools. Green points out that the 4-H members also learn new skills. They get a lesson about taking care of others, even people they might not know. They build some communication skills as they introduce themselves to new people and describe the project. They also get a review of safe behaviors around farm equipment.

The best part for Green is the interaction between the 4-H members and farmers. “The 4-Hers enjoy delivering them because the farmers are so surprised even when they have gotten one before,” she says. “It’s always a bright spot in someone’s day, or even week, to get an unexpected gift.”

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