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Youths may be key to safer farms

By Brandi Janssen

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FFA members in Lone Tree, Iowa, deliver new SMV emblems to their neighbors.


Photo courtesy of Lone Tree FFA

With the average age of farmers now approaching 60, the issue of farm transition remains important throughout the region.

At the recent Farm Futures Business Summit, one of the speakers expressed optimism about the future of agriculture, given the number of young people he observed at the summit. He



pointed out that not only are they ready to do the physical work, they're also up for the financial and economic planning that is necessary for a successful farm enterprise.



Those who work in agricultural safety and health also tend to be optimistic about the potential for future farms to be safer for workers and their families.

Growing up on a farm has been shown to be beneficial, as well as hazardous, for kids. Casper Bendixsen, director of the National Farm Medicine Center, calls this the “farm kid paradox.” While those of us who grew up on farms tend to have lower rates of seasonal allergies and asthma, we also were at higher risk of injury and even death from on-farm activities.

The National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health estimates a child dies on a farm every three days in the United States. Falls, injuries from machinery (especially ATVs), and drowning are all common causes of youth injury and death on farms.

Despite these risks, we also know that this generation was raised to be more attentive to “safety culture” than in the past. Seatbelts are the norm in the truck (if not on the tractor), and research has shown that young people are attentive to safety practices when handling chemicals. These data points give us some hope that in the future, agriculture will no longer be one of the most dangerous industries in the U.S.

At Iowa’s Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH), we work to engage youth in safety projects through our annual Ag Youth Grant program. Each year, we are continually impressed with the energy and creativity of our Iowa farm kids. In 2019, we awarded the Outstanding Youth Grant Award to the Delaware County Fair Society. The Fair Society worked with the Maquoketa Valley FFA chapter to plan an event hosting animal handling expert Temple Grandin. Grandin met with FFA members, as well as about 300 youths in the county, to give presentations on livestock handling and safety. The work of this group resulted in a project that had significant benefits for the entire community.

Other youth grant projects have become annual traditions. One of these is the “Stay Safe, Take a Break” project, started by Washington County 4-H. The project, which I-CASH funded for several consecutive years, involves 4-H members gathering and assembling safety and health information, bottled water and healthy snacks to deliver to farmers working during harvest. Teams of 4-H members would drive around the county looking for people out on their combines, pull into the fields to interrupt them, and give them the bags of materials.

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

We’ve also found that our farm youth are great advocates for roadway safety. One fall, we requested that FFA chapters identify farm equipment that was in need of new Slow Moving Vehicle (SMV) emblems. I-CASH provided the new emblems, and FFA members took them out to their relatives and neighbors, helping them to install them on tractors, balers and grain wagons.

We know that having good lighting and marking on farm equipment reduces the risk of a crash on rural roads. Our Iowa FFA students helped us implement some simple, but meaningful safety improvements across the state.

Like the business summit speaker, I’m optimistic about the future of farming. The energy and care youth groups have put into safety-related projects gives me hope we can reduce the too-high rates of farm-related injury and illness.

Applications for the 2020 Agricultural Youth Grants are due Feb. 17. Find more information at www.i-cash.org.

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