

News Column

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July 6, 2020

Safety for senior farmers and ranchers

At a time when many senior citizens are cashing in on Social Security or retirement accounts, senior farmers are looking forward to 10 to 20 more years of productivity. The average age of an American farmer is 57 years – significantly higher than in any other occupation. Farming and ranching are more than jobs. They are a way of life, offering financial, physical, emotional and spiritual rewards. This helps to explain why many farmers continue farming well into their 70s and 80s until they are either physically unable to perform essential tasks, or it becomes too risky to continue.

Agriculture is consistently among the most dangerous employment industries. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics has consistently shown that the agriculture industry has one of the highest fatality rates among industry sectors (31.2 per 100,000 employees). It also ranked agriculture third behind construction and transportation industries in total number (574) of fatalities in 2018.

Considering the physical and cognitive limitations that develop with aging and the inherently dangerous farming environment, it is not surprising that senior farmers are greatly susceptible to injury. As we age, physical strength, eyesight, hearing, balance and reaction time diminish significantly. Yet the dangers of farm equipment, tractors, and livestock typically remain the same.

Thus, it is important that senior farmers understand the physical challenges and increased risks of aging, and make the appropriate changes in work tasks and activities to ensure that they, their coworkers and their family are safe.

Failure to recognize and correct diminishing physical and sensory abilities puts senior farmers in great danger. Because the farm can also be the

homestead, anyone who might be working with or around farmers operating machinery and equipment faces the same risks.

Safety tips for senior farmers

Reducing farm hazards, risk of injury and death is generally no different for senior farmers than for any other farmers. The most effective way to minimize these hazards is to redesign the work environment, machinery, or methods to perform work tasks to lessen the exposure to injury and make safety a priority, according to safety experts. It is particularly difficult to change attitudes and behaviors in senior farmers, who have many years of experience and for whom risky behavior has become acceptable and has had positive results.

In light of the limited physical abilities that might be encountered, the following suggestions are especially important to the safety and health of senior farmers:

Increase light levels in barns and other work environments

Equip stairs and steps with handrails and non-slip surfaces

Make sure all paths in barns and buildings remain clean and free from obstacles

Ensure that all corrals and animal confinement areas are structurally secure and equipped with escape routes

Equip gates with easily accessible, workable latches and locks

Use hearing protection while operating loud equipment and while working in noisy animal confinement areas

Limit particularly hazardous tasks to daylight hours

Use powered lifts and mobile material carts to transport hay bales and feed, for example, around the farm

Equip all tractors with rollover protection structures and seatbelts

Minimize machinery operation at night

Refrain from operating machinery and tractors while under the influence of prescription drugs; which may have side-effects that limit your reaction time and sense of balance, interfering with your ability to perform work safely.