

Safety Watch: Expert recommends SOPs for safety

By Brandi Janssen Dec 12, 2018



Brad Forristall, David Rosmann, Josie Rozum and Dick Wittman spoke about the importance of safety SOPs at the recent Midwest Rural Agricultural Safety and Health Conference in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Photo courtesy Brandi Janssen

At times, farming seems like a purely reactive business. You react to the weather, an equipment breakdown or a sick animal.

But Idaho rancher and farm management expert Dick Wittman advocates for future-oriented business planning.

He travels nationally, promoting best management practices to ensure that family farms remain the cornerstone of the U.S. food system. A critical component of good management, according to Wittman, is including safety-related Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in the overall farm management plan.

According to Wittman, only about 16 percent of the farmers he works with have SOPs in place. These are critical, he said, as “standard guidance for repetitious and routine jobs.”

Developing SOPs for these tasks provides clarity for all employees, including those family members who help manage the business. Wittman points out that a lack of SOPs can have dire consequences, including inconsistent work, excessive turnover, accidents, and even ruination of a market.

Wittman emphasizes that “safety is not an island” — it has to be integrated completely into your operation. This includes developing SOPs for shop protocols, checklists for equipment operation and maintenance, grain storage protocols and seasonal work flow planning.

Wittman admits that the safety protocols on his own farm weren’t developed until his cousin nearly died in a tractor rollover. While the cousin was still in the Intensive Care Unit, the family designed a comprehensive safety policy that all employees sign annually.

Earlier this year, Wittman spent some time with three Iowa farmers as part of the Midwest Rural Agricultural Safety and Health (MRASH) conference. Conference organizers provided Wittman’s guidebook, *Building Effective Farm Management Systems*, to the participants and arranged two conference calls for Wittman to consult with them about their management practices, especially as they relate to safety. At the MRASH conference in Council Bluffs in late November, the farmers joined Wittman on a panel presentation to talk about the changes that they are working on for their farms.

Josie Rozum manages operations, sales and marketing for her family’s dairy and creamery in Ely, Iowa. She noted that she felt reassured after the first phone call with the group and realized that “all of us on the panel were all going through the same

things.”

David Rosmann, who farms with his dad and brother on their fifth-generation certified organic farm in Harlan, agreed.

“Our farm is organized chaos most days,” he said.

Both emphasized how important it is to go through all of the farm’s activities and think through the procedures needed to manage the operations.

Brad Forristall farms with his family and manages a crew of about 25 employees. His motivation for improving safety is his three young children.

He said, “All my kids are on the farm every day.”

In addition, he notes that his employees are critical to the farm.

“They all contribute something. Without them, our operation wouldn’t go,” he said.

One of the first things Wittman recommended to the group was to go through a “process of formalization,” where you get all of the leaders together to discuss how to implement SOPs on the farm. Wittman pointed out that this can be challenging.

“Sometimes after a family business workshop, people are all wound up and can’t wait to tell mom and dad how screwed up they are and tell them what to do,” he said.

Instead, he said, the goal is to celebrate the successes of the previous generation and build on them.

“It’s not that they [the older generation] don’t have SOPs, it’s just all in their head. Now with multiple generations and more complex farm organizations, you have to sell it as meeting the needs of the next generation,” he said. “It’s about leveraging the knowledge in the senior generation.”

That rang true for Rozum. When her parents started the dairy, it was just the two of them, and they were the total labor force for the farm. Then, as the children grew older and they added the creamery, the operation became more complicated.

For Rozum, the SOPs provide an opportunity for clarity.

“We have to define clarity with our family. When do we show up for work and when do we leave? How much time can we take off?” she said.

Another focus for Wittman is accountability and leadership.

“Management by committee is a recipe for mediocrity,” he said.

But, that doesn't mean that no one else gets to talk about an issue. Instead, it defines the lead person for safety, human resources or chemical management, but doesn't assume they do all the work.

Rosmann pointed out that tips from other industries can also find their way onto a farm. He worked at a lumber yard after college where employees would tie bright flags to a piece of equipment that needed attention. He has brought that practice to the farm.

“One of our hay bales had a bunch of wire caught in it that I couldn't pull out. I couldn't deal with it then, but I wanted to remember when it was time to use the bale, so I put a flag on it so we would deal with it,” he said.

Forristall admits that this process isn't always easy.

“It's hard to drink beer with your buddy the night before and then say, ‘Tomorrow I'm going to do an employee evaluation.’ But the SOPs help with that because everyone knows what to expect,” he said.

Wittman firmly believes that family farms will remain the foundation of agriculture; but he also strongly advocates for effective, formal business planning as a way to ensure success.

For more information about Wittman Consulting, go to <http://wittmanconsulting.com/>.

Brandi Janssen, PhD, directs Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH) based at the University of Iowa College of Public Health.