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Safety Watch: Small steps affect beginning farmers' safety

By Brandi Janssen

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Every year I attend at least part of the annual conference of Practical Farmers of Iowa. It's an engaging and innovative group, and I'm always curious to learn about what they're doing.

This year, I made a point to get to sessions led by beginning farmers, and one story stood out.

Rory Van Wyk and his wife recently purchased 40 acres near Winterset, Iowa. They plan to raise grass-finished beef, but before they can get started, they have to rebuild the aging fences on the property.

Van Wyk stepped up to the podium for his presentation wearing a pair of safety glasses, and the reason soon became clear. After showing a few slides with pictures of his family and the rolling hills of his farm, he came to one of his first "lessons learned:" safety. In October 2016, while rolling up old barbed wire pulled from a fence line, the wire came loose and struck him in the left eye.

Van Wyk is a firefighter with the Des Moines fire department. Like many beginning farmers, he has maintained a full time job off the farm, relegating farm work to evening and weekend hours.

"I was in a hurry," he said. He had gotten home from work and knew he had only about an hour of daylight left. He arrived home and quickly got ready to head to the field, leaving his safety glasses behind.

He pointed to the safety glasses he was wearing, "If I told you that for \$1.79, I could give you \$70,000 back, you'd take me up on that."

As a firefighter, Van Wyk is very safety conscious, he never goes out on a call without having safety glasses, hearing protection and all the personal protective equipment required of a firefighter. He typically employs similar safety precautions on his farm.

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But that evening when he rushed out to work on the fence line, he neglected to put on the safety glasses that are always near his back door. That ultimately cost him many thousands of dollars in healthcare costs.

He stated that the two seconds he saved by not putting on the safety goggles also cost him five months of work at the fire department while he recovered from two surgeries. He is scheduled for a third in the coming weeks.

The barbed wire severely damaged the lens of his eye, causing a “traumatic cataract” that instantly clouded his vision. During his final surgery, he will be fitted with an artificial lens. He will have sight in the left eye, but the artificial lens will not refocus like a natural lens.

The challenges of starting a farm are well known. Even if a new farmer finds land he or she can afford, it is likely that it will need some work on fencing, buildings or other infrastructure. Beginning farmers may need to purchase used equipment and may not have access to the owner’s manual or maintenance records. And, the learning curve is steep for those who don’t have a farming background.

Although Van Wyk grew up on a diversified livestock farm and is well versed in safety procedures thanks to his fire department job, he has the same constraints as many beginning farmers who keep their day jobs while they work to get a farm in shape for their future enterprises.

His story reinforces the importance of investing in safety, especially in the early years when you’re trying to get your operation up and running.

These investments are financial, and include the small things like safety glasses and hearing protection, as well as the bigger things, like a Roll-Over Protective structure (ROPS) on an older tractor that will save the operator in the instance of a tractor overturn.

Investments of time are also necessary. From the minute it takes to put on the safety glasses, to a few hours spent developing a hazard checklist and safety plan for the farm. Any of these might end up saving thousands of dollars in healthcare — or funeral expenses — for a farm family, as well as time lost from work.

With the average age of a farmer approaching 60 years, beginning farmers are more important than ever to the agricultural economy. Starting a farm is capital-intensive; investing some time, energy and money in safety is a guaranteed pay-off.

*Brandi Janssen, PhD, directs Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health at the University of Iowa College of Public Health. She can be reached at **brandi-janssen@uiowa.edu** or 319-335-4190.*

