

Iowa Farmer Today

Agencies work together to add respirator test options

By **Brandi Janssen**

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Carolyn Sheridan of the Ag Health and Safety Alliance conducts a respirator fit test training session via zoom.

Photo courtesy Brandi Janssen

On most farms, respiratory protection is a necessity at some point. Whether you're working in a grain bin or livestock barn, handling chemicals or just doing dusty building maintenance, having respiratory protection available should be standard safety protocol.

Up until recently, making decisions about what respirators to buy and how well they worked stayed mostly in the hands of farmers.

However, changes to the EPA's Worker Protection Standard (WPS) in 2015, which went into effect in 2017, require respirator fit testing for people who apply certain pesticides.

Meaghan Anderson, Iowa State University Extension field agronomist, says, "An important part of training pesticide applicators is to inform them of policy changes that impact the way they use and apply pesticides."

However, the new requirements for fit testing presented a challenge because of limited fit test options across the state.

"We often received questions about how the fit test process works and where to get fit tested," she says.

Get tested

The purpose of a respirator fit test is to ensure that the respirator forms a tight seal around the wearer's mouth and nose and that no potential contaminants are seeping through. There are numerous types of respirators, in different sizes, so it can be difficult to know what you should wear in different situations.

To fit test someone for a respirator, you need a fit test "kit" that includes a hood and a bitter or sweet solution to spray into the hood

while someone is wearing a respirator. If they can taste the solution while wearing it, the respirator doesn't fit correctly.

In addition to the fit test process, the WPS requires a "medical evaluation." First, a medical questionnaire is administered. In some cases, depending on the responses to the questionnaire, a medical evaluation is required by a physician or a nurse practitioner before a person can be approved to wear a respirator.

More options

In 2017, Iowa State University and the Department of Agriculture worked with Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH), the Department of Public Health, and WORKSAFE Iowa to develop a list of respirator fit testing services across the state. However, it was soon evident that there were shortages.

Earlier this year, I met with a team of ISU field agronomists to figure out how we could solve this problem.

We reached out to Carolyn Sheridan, executive director of the Ag Health and Safety Alliance, who is an experienced fit test trainer and has developed a fit test curriculum that included information about respiratory hazards in agriculture, the Worker Protection Standard requirements, and the technical details of how to conduct a respirator fit test.

We knew that I-CASH could provide the fit test kits, Carolyn could conduct the trainings, and Iowa State Extension would help with promotion. However, we didn't know who would be interested in taking the training and we weren't sure how to deliver them, given the COVID-19 pandemic that had most of us working from home.

Although Carolyn had never conducted the training in an online format, she was willing to try it out.

We reached out to regional public health directors, asking if their county staff would be interested in learning how to fit test. The response was quick and very positive. Many had been getting questions about respirators from across their communities, as care facilities and schools were wondering about respirators as a part of their COVID-19 protocols.

In addition, many Extension staff members were also enthusiastic about learning how to fit test. As Anderson points out, Extension “has always been an important resource for farmers. It is a natural fit that we can provide the service of fit testing to farmers in rural communities across the state.”

After all of this, two trainings were offered this fall that included county public health personnel and Extension staff. We now have an additional 33 individuals trained in 23 counties. A full list can be found i-cash.org.

The new requirements of the WPS took some farmers and applicators by surprise. Similarly, the lack of fit testing options in Iowa took many of us in public health by surprise.

We are lucky to have so many agencies focused on ensuring the health, safety and productivity of our ag workforce.

Meaghan Anderson sums it up, “I appreciate how we were able to bring a network together so quickly to train a group safely during a pandemic. This will benefit rural communities for years to come.”

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