Episode Title: Cold Weather Training Tips

Summary: In this episode, we wrap up our series on winter hazards and talk about things to include in cold weather safety trainings. Our guest is Dr. Maristela Rovai, a veterinarian, assistant professor, and extension dairy specialist at South Dakota State University. Dr. Rovai develops extension programs and assists dairy producers in training dairy workers. Winter can be challenging for anyone who has to work in cold temperatures and it can be especially challenging for immigrant workers new to the Midwest climate. Dr. Rovai shares tips on communicating winter hazards in cold weather trainings to protect workers at work and at home.

Expert: Maristela Rovai

Episode Quote:

"It's really important to not only to recognize it in ourselves but to recognize it in our colleagues, because we might know what to do and they may not."

– Dr. Maristela Rovai, SDSU Extension Dairy Specialist (on why to include signs and symptoms of frostbite and hypothermia in cold weather trainings)

Transcript

00:04 K. Crawford

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

In this episode, we wrap up our series on winter hazards. We've talked about how cold weather gear can help protect against frostbite and hypothermia and how to prevent falls on ice. Today we are going to talk about what to include in cold weather safety trainings.

Our guest today is Dr. Maristela Rovai, a veterinarian, an assistant professor, and extension dairy specialist at South Dakota State University. Dr. Rovai develops extension programs and assists dairy producers in training dairy workers. Today, we are going to talk about cold weather tips to incorporate into trainings to help dairy workers in the workplace and at home. Winter can be challenging for dairy workers who have to take care of livestock 24/7; and it can be especially challenging for immigrant workers coming from warmer climates and may not be prepared for Midwest winters.

Hopefully, the tips we share in this podcast are also relevant and helpful for anyone moving to the upper Midwest from warmer climates.

01:13 M. Rovai

My name is Maristela Rovai. I'm originally from Brazil. I had been studying for 12 years in Spain, before coming here to South Dakota, and I have been here for seven years now. I'm a veterinarian by training and my work primarily here at SDSU is to work with their industry personnel, and I do a lot of trainings to the workforce, and I help troubleshooting milk quality aspects for dairy producers. And also, I teach some courses at SDSU related to lactation physiology, and we started also, a few years ago, teaching Spanish to the students to get acquainted with Spanish words used at dairy farms.

02:04 K. Crawford

In winter, dairy workers are exposed to cold temperatures, and cold weather hazards like ice, snow, and sleet. I asked Dr. Rovai to talk about why these hazards may be especially challenging for immigrant workers new to the dairy industry.

02:18 M. Rovai

One of the primary things that the workers face in the wintertime is that winter here in the northern part lasts long[er] than what we can even imagine. In our countries of origin, we might have really mild temperatures, like it's here in late spring, and it's just for a short period of time. So, here we are talking in the Midwest about five months wintertime, and we– and I say we, because I'm a Latino myself, originally from Brazil– and we are not used to this type of weather. And that is when we see accidents happening. Because rules are different, culture is different. So, it's important for us to know we cannot ask them to know something that they, they don't know. They were not raised, you know, under the circumstance.

03:10 K. Crawford

I think that's an important point. If you haven't had to be out in this weather before, it's hard to know how to prepare for it– what clothes to wear, how to drive your car on icy roads, how to walk on ice. These are things we might take for granted when we've lived in these conditions for a long time.

I do want to talk about this resource you shared with us. It's Cold Weather Tips for Dairy Farmers; it's a web page and I will link to it in the episode resources because I think it's really helpful. It has tips for what to wear, how to drive safely, how to prepare a house or trailer for winter. You also include temperature conversions, Celsius to Fahrenheit and lists of common words and expressions with English and Spanish translations– things like "black ice," wind chill, and "feels like" temperatures.

03:56 M. Rovai

Yes, because you know we always tell them you know, please listen to the weather service, you know, but then we you have vocabulary that we are not used to. "There is a blizzard is coming, protect yourself!" And then, "What's a blizzard?" You know? "What is that involving?" So, it's really important.

And then other things that we are not used to is the "feeling" temperature. You have the actual temperature, you know, so I check outside and say okay it's minus 22 degrees Celsius, you know, but the feeling, it's 33 negative, so it's, it's huge.

With wind chill it's something that we really need to take care also, because sometimes you know, we don't understand. For me when I when I came here, and when I talked to employees, they don't understand what is the wind chill, you know why [do] I need to protect my nose, my ears?

So that's something that we need to explain then. Once they understand what is going on, they will take better care. And one thing that was Latinos, is that we need to understand the why. We don't– and I say we, because I'm in that group of people– that don't tell me what to do, explain me why. So, to understand that too is really important– how to protect, why, you know, we need to cover our ears, and don't go outside when you have wind chill. Try to protect yourself the best you can.

05:29 K. Crawford

Dr. Rovai shared a story about a recent encounter she had with someone who just traveled to South Dakota to being work on a dairy farm:

05:37 M. Rovai

Yesterday when I got back from Brazil, and I was waiting for a friend to pick me up. And there was a guy sitting next to me in flip flops, a really thin coat, no gloves, nothing. And yesterday it was really, really, really cold. He asked me if I could help in Spanish, so he was lucky that I could speak Spanish, and I said, so where are you coming from? He said Nicaragua. It was 7 p.m., and he was at the airport since 2 p.m., waiting for someone. And he's coming to work on a dairy farm with no winter clothes. And the poor guy was like, you know, really, really, really cold because he just, he didn't have and, you know, this, you don't expect when you are coming for the first time. You don't expect this cold.

06:25 K. Crawford

Thank you for sharing that. I think that helps to illustrate these points that you've been making. And flip flops– that makes me cold just thinking about it! So, what are some of the key points to include in winter safety trainings? You have a lot of great information on your page but let's just give some highlights.

06:41 M. Rovai

So, we need waterproof shoes that they can be protected from the cold temperatures and the wet temperatures. And I have employees that work with calves, and when the calves leave the farm, the hutches need to be cleaned. And it's really low temperatures and they need to really clean with water and the employees get wet. They need really to take care of that– the time of the day that they're doing that and how they're doing that and what they are wearing also with clothes and shoes. It's important. If you're wet during working time, you are not going to work well. You know, you might work that day, but the next day you will not.

I think another important point too, is to be hydrated– to drink enough water during the day to make sure that all your organs are working well. And to avoid alcohol, as much as you can. And for the dairy farm employees, I had many employees that talk to us and say, "You know, I have alcohol, here with me, because it makes me feel warm." And that is wrong. They don't understand that that warm feeling is just for a really short period of time, and they are going to lose the body temperature, in fact. Farmers and employees should know that.

And that, even though it's basic, I think that is good to refresh the employees [about] the importance of not to drink alcohol, of eating, bringing to the farm things that will give them high energy, you know, we're going to be hungry, more, you know, most of the time, and also for the farmers to provide to those employees, maybe some more breaks for them to get that energy back and drink warm beverage that's coffee or tea, that's going to bring that, you know, warm feeling, but they will not lose, you know, body temperature. And explain to them you know why they need to wear warm clothes, not really tight for not interrupting the blood flow, and waterproof boots, all of that is important.

And one thing that's really interesting. You know, we never, never thought about having things in our car, and how that's important to have those supplies [for] that emergency. Keep in our cars, or to drive, because farm employees always, they are like, "I don't have money I don't have money, you know I need to save money," so they are running the cars with really low gas levels, and no you cannot, you never know what may happen, you know? And also, cell phones, you know, they need to be fully charged, it's really important.

I think that's an important part of the message here is that even though you think that's basic, tell them. Tell them, explain, get a time, 15 minutes, 20 minutes, get the people together and explain the basics.

09:46 K. Crawford

I know we have heard from employers at some of the shows we've gone to that have said, you know, we do training on site, but I don't always know what to include. So, I like that your trainings cover these situations both in and out of the workplace.

Dr. Rovai also went on to highlight the importance of communication between employers and employees when talking about these hazards and implementing prevention strategies.

10:09 M. Rovai

Trying to perform some of the tasks during the time of the day that you have better temperatures, a little bit warmer temperatures, you'd be smart to do. I know that sometimes you cannot because you have that daily schedule. But if you can reorganize– and I think one important thing here is communication– that's key.

Even though, you know, the employees say, "No, no, no, I don't have anything to do." Sit with them. Ask them, ask their input, let them talk. What would they like? "You know I'm feeling really cold during the day, if I have maybe a few breaks more to drink a cup of coffee– 10 minutes," that's going to improve their working tasks, so I think that that's important communication is key.

10:57 K. Crawford

Another important piece of your training includes an overview of frostbite and hypothermia– what those are and how to recognize the symptoms.

11:05 M. Rovai

Oh yes, I think it's really important and not only to recognize it in ourselves but to recognize it in our colleagues. Because we might know what to do and they may not, but we are recognizing the problem, that it's happening, and that safety training is really important in a way to recognize.

Yeah, I remember a few years ago we had some farm work, well on the research side, but I was working with employees, and we needed to perform blood sampling in the animals. And outside it was insane. You know we got our fingers really frozen, and we needed to perform blood sampling in one animal, go to protect ourselves, come back outside again, and not continue straight, you know? Even wearing gloves and everything. So, it's really important to protect and to know the signs.

12:00 K. Crawford

Yeah, because I think a lot of times people think I just need to finish this task, right? And you don't realize that you really do need that break, right? Even if you're wearing your gear.

12:09 M. Rovai

I think here that comes back to that communication point, because I work a lot with farm employees, and most of the time, communication, it's not flowing. Because they cannot open up to their supervisors because they don't have the way to do that sometimes. And they're afraid of that. “How can I tell my supervisor that my hand is hurting because of the cold? You know he's going to tell me that I'm weak.” Many times, we hear that, you know, “I cannot, I cannot share that. They will say that I'm weak.” And it’s not. So, it's why both parties need to get together and talk, please. “This is important. These signs are important, and you may get sick, so please share that.”

Once they feel comfortable with that, they will share, because they might be afraid if not performing that task that there will be consequences, they will lose their jobs, and it's not that. I'm a hundred percent sure that farmers will understand, and they will schedule differently. You know, they will manage those tasks during winter in a different way. If they share what is going on.

And I think that also, have safety trainings, during winter for example, and even other periods of the year, maybe a safety training covering a little bit of everything. And during this period of the year, leave a brochure, leave something for them in their break room that they will see the information there. If they don't know how to read, bring in something with pictures. Or, even knowing how to read, they are tired at their breaks so bring something with image[s], diagrams, that will hold their attention, that's important. And if you know those producers, they have monitors in their break rooms, fantastic, have videos. We have many safety videos talking about those hazards during the wintertime.

I think that lunch breaks are lunch breaks and it’s their time, but some producers you know they want to do the [training during] lunch breaks so if it is lunch break, and you want to talk 10 minutes not more than that, bring candies, bring chocolate, something, you know, and talk they will be paying attention to you those 10 minutes, talk about winter, you know, bring those important topics.

14:42 K. Crawford

These are all great suggestions: Don’t assume that workers unfamiliar with Midwest winters understand the risks of cold exposure. Communicate to those not familiar with the cold about both how and why the body needs energy to keep warm during our long, cold winters. And don’t assume that someone new to the area understands the language our reporters use to describe winter weather.

Check out the links provided in the episode resources section of our website which include links to the Cold Weather Tips for Dairy Farmers that Dr. Rovai developed. There are both English and Spanish versions of these webpages available.

15:17 M. Rovai

Listen in to the FarmSafe podcast to join in the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

K. Crawford

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there are any topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website at gpcah.org or email us.

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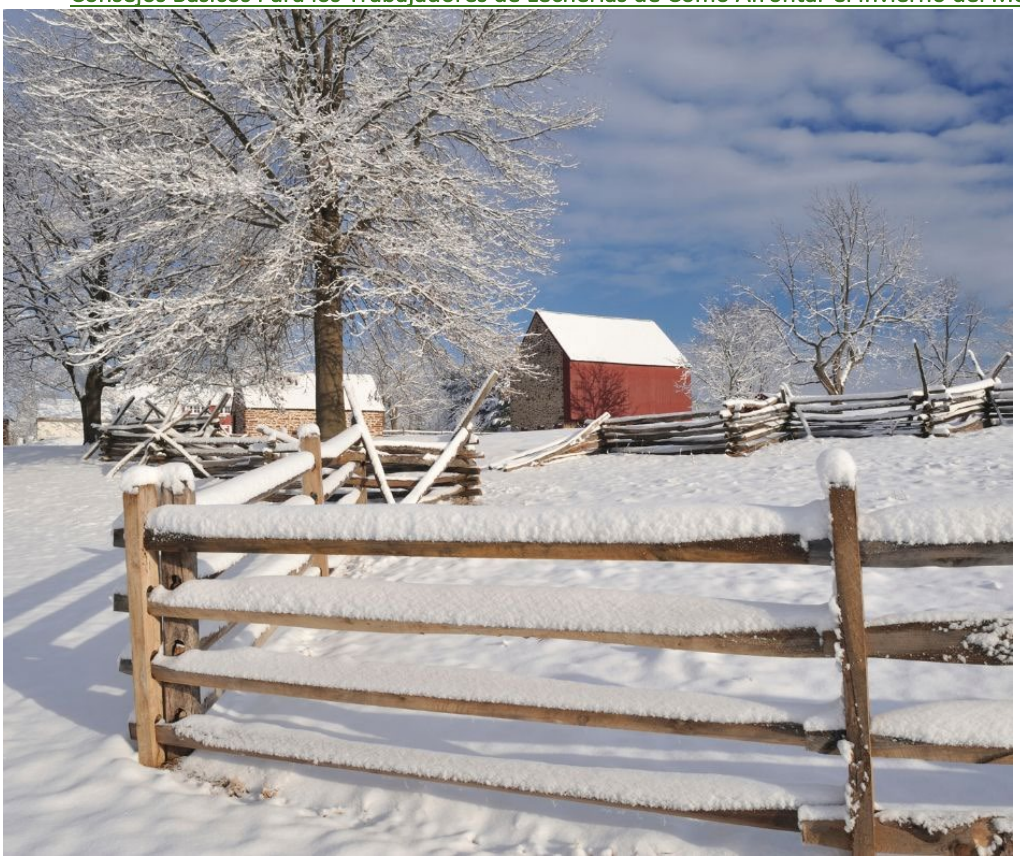
Episode Resources

- Colder Weather Tips for Midwestern Dairy Farm
- Consejos Básicos Para los Trabajadores de Lecherías de Cómo Afrontar el Invierno del Medio Oeste



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