

**Episode Title:** Pilot Spotlight – Airing out Farm Stress

**Summary:** May is Mental Health Awareness Month, so today, we are joined by Meg Moynihan from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and Don Wick, host of the *TransFARMation* podcast, to talk about their project called *Airing Out Farm Stress*. They received a pilot grant from the Great Plains Center for their project, which aimed to tackle the silence around how the stresses inherent in agricultural production can affect the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of agricultural workers.

What started out as 60-second radio segments turned into a successful podcast, *TransFARMation*, which covers in-depth mental health topics by sharing farmers' stories: "Here, you are hearing stories of people like you, other farmers who are talking about really difficult situations that they had to go through, but they came out the other side."

**Expert:** Meg Moynihan and Don Wick

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**Episode Quote:**

*"We wanted to try to create some awareness, we wanted to reduce some of the stigma associated with farm stress and mental wellness, and that's really what we've been able to share during this this whole [TransFARMation] series."*

– Don Wick, Host of the TransFARMation podcast

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## Transcript

**00:04 K. Crawford**

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. Today I am joined by Meg Moynihan from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and Don Wick, a farm broadcaster with the Red River Farm Network, and host of the TransFARMation podcast. In 2018, they received a Great Plains pilot grant. The mission of the Great Plains Center is to improve safety and health among agricultural communities. One of the ways the Center accomplishes this mission is by funding pilot projects that promote innovative outreach and research efforts to prevent agricultural injury and illness. Projects can be funded up to \$30,000 which can be used to cover staff salary, supplies, equipment, and other expenses necessary to complete the project.

Meg and Don's project, called Airing out Farm Stress, aimed to tackle the silence around how the stresses inherent in agricultural production can affect the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of agricultural workers. They partnered with a local radio network to create 60-second segments to air to a listening audience of more than 100,000 North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota agricultural workers and family members. The project also led to the creation of more in-depth podcasts on mental health topics.

Thank you both for being here with me today. To start, can you tell us a little about the work you do?

**01:23 D. Wick**

Certainly. Don Wick. I'm a farm broadcaster. We have a network based in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where we serve farmers in agriculture in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Been in this business for 40 years and enjoy being able to communicate the story of agriculture.

**01:42 M. Moynihan**

And I'm Meg Moynihan. I'm a Senior Advisor at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and I'm also a dairy farmer. My role at the department is focusing really on what I call the human experience of agriculture and that involves the stressors that farmers, and other people in agricultural communities, experience, I would say, on a pretty continual basis. And also, some mental health issues that are sometimes caused by stress and sometimes contributes to stress.

**K. Crawford**

So, tell me about your project. How did you get the idea for this?

**02:13 M. Moynihan**

Maybe I'll start and Don, you can chime in. This goes back to a conversation that Don and I had after an interview one day. Don had called in response to a press release— probably something about our Minnesota Farm and Rural Helpline. And after the recording, you know, we just sort of chatted, and I think you said Don, "I'm getting a lot of calls and talking to a lot of people who just really seem up against the wall." And this was, I'm trying to think of what date this was. This would have been 2017 or 2018, you know, and we had been through so many consistent years of low prices and weather challenges, and things. And Don was just talking about how down farmers were, and then I think that you and I just started talking about that, and that was the kernel of, what could we do through radio? Which I've used a lot, I mean I'm a big fan of radio, because I know from personal experience that farmers always have the radio on. I think it's easier to get a message to farmers when they're already paying attention and not ask them to pay attention to something new.

I think that conversation started, and then the opportunity from the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health crossed my desk and I sort of made the connection with, "well, here would be a way that we could pilot this." Now that's what I remember. What do you remember, Don?

**03:34 D. Wick**

I agree. I know I was really hearing from farmers that were under a lot of stress during that time. And certainly, a lot of it was market-based at that particular time. What I liked about this is out of the kernel of a conversation, and Meg was able to find the funding through Great Plains we were able to tie not only the podcast that's very popular, but also that combination with farm radio, and then there's a digital component as well, and I think that that mix having that message right where the farmers are tuning in for markets or farm news or weather I think that's been an important element of this whole thing.

**04:12 M. Moynihan**

And you know, Don, I think it was really key—we talked about this early on—it was really key that this was paid time. It was not a public service announcement. You know it wasn't a freebie that was going to run at three in the morning. This was prime time, so like Don said, this was during the market reports, like when people are paying attention, when they're in the house for noon dinner, or when they're out spending some time behind the wheel of their tractor. So, I think that that's really important.

And you know Don, remember the podcasts were an add-on! We started this, just thinking about doing some 60-second episodes, and then you said, "Hey, I've got all this tape from the interviews. This would make a nice podcast." And so that was like a bonus.

**04:51 D. Wick**

You're right, I forgot about that element actually. The radio part of it started first and obviously we've got some great content when we're able to share some of these stories. So, the podcasts have been a great part of this as well.

**M. Moynihan**

And then your team got the podcast put up on some subscription services so that people could subscribe and automatically get those downloaded in the beginning. We pointed people to the website and then, at some point, Don, your staff put them up on Apple Podcasts, you know so you could use whatever service you use, and find those podcasts and subscribe, which I dutifully do.

**D. Wick**

Yep, want to make it as user friendly as possible.

**05:31 K. Crawford**

So, this is the TransFARMation podcast. For any of our listeners that haven't heard it yet, do you want to talk a little bit about what it is, and what you what you cover on there?

**D. Wick**

Frankly, it's sharing stories. It's talking to farmers and experts in the field. I think we wanted to try to create some awareness, we wanted to reduce some of the stigma associated with farm stress and mental wellness, and that's really what we've been able to share during this this whole series. The series ran from April of 2019 through June of 2021. And now we're back actually just starting again with the second round of TransFARMation. So, to me, it's those stories. I don't know what your thoughts are Meg, but that's really what this is all about.

#### 06:15 M. Moynihan

It really is, and I think the underlying message there of all of the broadcasts that Don has put together is "you are not alone." I don't mean that in a creepy way, I mean, you are not alone in what you're going through. Here you are hearing stories of people like you, other farmers who are talking about really difficult situations that they had to go through, but they came out the other side. But they're people like you, you know? They're not necessarily experts telling you what you should do; it's people telling you what they did do. So, you're not alone there, but you're also, not alone and having to do it by yourself, because Don was really good about highlighting resources and letting farmers who might be listening know where they could get some support.

And so, I think we pretty much concluded Don, that the episodes that featured producers were the ones that really resonated most strongly. Would you agree about that?

#### 07:11 D. Wick

Very much so. That's where we had the most feedback. I think that's where farmers like to hear from farmers and enjoy those kinds of stories. And what I appreciate is have that opportunity to sit across a kitchen table with someone, and they share deeply personal stories. I look at Theresia Gillie of Hallock, Minnesota, or Dale Zahradka who's out of Adams North Dakota region. Both have lost family members, someone took their life by suicide, and they really didn't share that story with many people at that point, and they were able to offer what they were going through, and they did it really because they didn't want other people to go through some of the same things they were. So, deeply emotional, but I think they really made a connection with people, and it's been very important.

#### 08:03 M. Moynihan

And I will tell you from our perspective one of the keys to the success of this was partnering with Don and the Red River Farm Network, not just because of access to ears, but because they have such long and deep relationships with their listeners. So, somebody thinking about talking about something very personal, if they're talking to Don Wick, it's different than if a stranger calls them, and wants to talk to them and poke around in their deep dark underbelly. You know what I mean?

So, part of the magic of why this worked really was that team at the Red River Farm network, and, in fact, one of your staff even became a story, Don.

#### 08:40 D. Wick

Yeah, one of my fellow farm broadcasters used to be a farmer and went through some challenging times and came into the business of farm broadcast and he shared some stories. I've known the guy for 20 years, and he shared stories in our podcast and our interviews that I hadn't heard before and talked about that there is life after farming, and it was a very important message for folks to hear, and it was fun to see just because he got so much feedback on it that I was able to see that side of it as well.

#### 09:11 M. Moynihan

You know that's an important point Don, and I remember back to one of our first meetings of our advisory group. We put together an advisory group because Don and I figure we don't know everything, and we needed ears to the ground. And so, we had people from the listening region who got together to talk about what are the issues on people's minds? What are people hungry to hear? What do they need to hear, and they might not realize it? And then this all-important who is out there to tell the stories? And one of the things I very strongly impressed me at that meeting was, they said, **"This needs to be hopeful. This can't just be gloom and doom stories about how horrible agriculture is, and how depressed we all are. It has to be people who have moved through."**

Maybe it was a terrible thing. Maybe it was losing limbs in an accident, or maybe it was losing a family member, and their life was changed forever in ways they did not like, but they survived. And so, we needed really to have this underpinning of hope— that there is hope out there.

Otherwise, why get up in the morning?

**10:12 K. Crawford**

This really is a success story because this project has grown so far beyond that initial pilot. Can you talk a little about how that happened?

**M. Moynihan**

Well, you know, it really resonated, because the funding from Great Plains, the pilot funding was just that. It was pilot funding, and it supported the creation and broadcast of five episodes, and very rapidly Don was able to make connections with other businesses and community foundations that wanted to support these stories. And so, it blew past those first five episodes and turned into its own thing, and I don't know how many episodes, we ended up with Don, and if you have an idea of how many organizations or companies helped underwrite a portion of that, but it was a lot.

**10:58 D. Wick**

We had 35 episodes that aired during our first round. And now again we're back on again for another round of TransFARMation. So, we've got a lot of those stories that we've shared. And you're right, it was basically farm organizations— a farmers' union, Farm Bureau, corn growers, soybean growers, those kinds of organizations that really stepped up and supported this effort as well and helped us continue it on. I think that's really been a key to be able to keep that story going too.

**11:28 M. Moynihan**

So, I guess you could look at this as really successful seed money. Sometimes you plant a seed, and you don't know if it's old or moldy, and it's not going to grow, and sometimes you plant a seed and it rockets out of the ground and in our case, it really rocketed out of the ground, and it exceeded my expectations. I think it exceeded a lot of expectations, and I can remember going to legislative hearing in St. Paul, sort of an informational hearing. We like to keep legislators updated on emerging issues and continuing issues. And so, this was one about mental health and farm stress, and I was describing the TransFARMation program, and several legislators said, "Why is this only in the Red River Valley?" "Why is this only at Northern Minnesota? We need this in my part of the state." And so, I took that pretty seriously and started thinking about well, radio is cost effective, but it is not cheap, and I thought, well, how are we going to do this?

And then last year some funding became available through USDA. They're supporting state departments of agriculture to invest in the expanding farm stress support, and I thought, boom, here we are! So, we're using a portion of that money. Don is very much involved in leading this with another farm network. So, the two networks are cooperating and we're moving this program— expanding it, I guess I should say, from Northern Minnesota into central and southern Minnesota. And so that's awfully exciting.

**12:47 D. Wick**

And you know this is also fun— I haven't shared this with you yet Meg, but I had a meeting just a week or two ago, and ran into a colleague of mine in Montana, and they're starting a similar program to this. So that's been gratifying as well to see this branch out into other parts of the country too.

**M. Moynihan**

Very cool.

**K. Crawford**

Do you have any recommendations for others thinking about applying for a pilot grant?

**13:11 M. Moynihan**

I will say that I think that framing this as a pilot is really wonderful, because I think it challenges people's creativity and I think, too, often we feel like we're writing proposals, or securing funds for something that we have to be sure it's going to work. And I think that's really room for creativity, and you need a little bit of leeway to throw the spaghetti at the wall and say we're going to do our best and we'll learn along the way, but it may not turn out the way we thought it would. Now in our case, it did, plus! but you know it gave us the liberty to try things and to do things a little bit differently. Somehow, we need to spur more creativity and think about new ways of doing things, new topics to explore, new kinds of partnerships. And I think all of that can really be generated with a pilot grant.

#### 13:58 K. Crawford

That's a great point. Sometimes we can have the biggest impact by trying out these new ideas. As we wrap up, do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share?

#### D. Wick

I'll just say I've been in farm broadcasting, like I said 40 years, and I've never been part of anything that's been as gratifying as this and I think—a lot of it's anecdotal but I've had feedback from people where this has made a difference, and that's why we get up in the morning and go to work isn't it? That's pretty important.

#### 14:30 M. Moynihan

In that vein, one of our advisory committee members has a brother who farms and knows about the podcast and about her involvement, and he was out—remember the story? He was out in the bar—at a bar, and he was sitting next to a guy who was just really down and really struggling. And the brother said to the guy you know there's a great podcast, about this about you know our dad was profiled, and he went to see a therapist back during the farm crisis of the eighties and he helped thought it was really helpful, and you know here's how you could just listen to it—if you want to hear our dad on the radio. And the guy, did it. I think the end of the story was that guy did go and seek out some mental health support for himself because he heard you know this old-timer who demystified it and said he could do it but that's another case of that just sort of you, you know people talking to each other about it, which is really what we wanted to happen.

And I think, too, we talked about the facts through the programming that not everybody needs the same thing, you know? Not everybody needs a mental health therapist. I think probably we could all benefit from one. But you know, some people need a doctor. Some people need a pastor. Some people need a different banker. Some people need an attorney. Some people need marriage counseling, you know. Everybody needs something a little differently, some people need a magic wand to make the weather better. But everybody needs something a little differently, and we kind of have to respect that about ourselves and about each other.

#### 15:55 D. Wick

It was also something I found again going back and kind of reviewing the episodes we've had are here this morning ahead of this, podcast and so many people talked about the community that came out and supported them when they maybe had gone through a farm accident or had some tragedy in their life. In rural America, I think folks they want to roll up their sleeves and help people, and that came through time and time again about community.

#### M. Moynihan

And going to what Don talked about earlier, which is **reducing that stigma**, and realizing you are not a freak for feeling overwhelmed or feeling desperate. You are actually pretty normal.

#### 16:32 K. Crawford

Check out the links provided in the episode resources section of our website, which include links to the TransFARMatation webpage and the Minnesota Farm and Rural Helpline. TransFARMatation is available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast directory.

We also provided a link to the Pilot Project page on the Great Plains website. Check out this page to find out more about pilot projects and opportunities for funding. There's contact information on the website, so please reach out if you have any questions.

Original music for the FarmSafe podcast was written and performed by Ben Schmidt.

This work was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health.

## Episode Resources

- [TransFARMatIon](#)
- [Minnesota Farm and Rural Helpline](#)
- [GPCAH Pilot Grant Opportunities](#)

## Photo

