

Episode Title: Cattle Feedyard Safety, Part 2: Safety Climate Improvement Strategies

Summary: We are back with Dr. Athena Ramos this week. As we continue the conversation on feedyard safety, we look at how safety climate can inform safety compliance and adoption in feedyard workers. How can a cowboy's safety behavior impact an entire workforce, and how can we get feedyard managers to prioritize safety conversations? These questions and more will be examined in this week's episode.

Expert: Dr. Athena Ramos

Episode Quote:

"They've found that a lot of feedyard workers and managers really want more formalized safety training materials and resources to be available."

– Dr. Athena Ramos, Associate Professor, Center for Reducing Health Disparities, College of Public Health University of Nebraska Medical Center

Transcript

00:15 A. Proctor

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.

00:36 A. Proctor

In the last episode of the FarmSafe podcast, we met with Dr. Ramos from University of Nebraska, where we learned to slow down and think before acting when handling animals. We learned that cattle feedyards are dangerous places, and we will continue our conversation with Dr. Ramos in this episode. We will discuss how to focus on improving the safety climate of cattle feedyard operations and how to best communicate safety messages to cattle feedyard workers.

01:02 A. Proctor

Would you mind describing the safety climate in cattle feedyards?

01:06 A. Ramos

Safety climate can be a leading indicator of safety outcomes, meaning that we can measure safety climate without waiting to look for injuries that happen and then say, oh, that wasn't a good decision. So, safety climate and safety culture go hand in hand. Our team has been working with a couple of anthropologists to explore safety culture and the feedyard operations. They've spent time on multiple feedyard operations and getting to be with lots of different feedyard workers, and some of the things that they found is that feedyard workers feel a lot of different difficult conditions and a lot of risk to health and safety, kind of on a consistent basis. But the people are hard working. They're gritty, right? And they adapt to the difficult situation. So, in the absence of more formalized types of health and safety training, they create their own systems. They're not waiting for a workers' compensation insurance company, or a NIOSH funded AG Center to say, here's the resources. People are figuring this stuff out on their own. They've they found that a lot of feedyard workers and managers really want more formalized safety training materials and resources to be available.

Sometimes, as I mentioned, they've kind of got these self-organized systems for managing risk and trying to foster more of a positive type of safety culture. In the feedyard operation, they're typically divided into different departments. There might be a processing crew that handles the entry and the exit of the cattle onto the operation. There might be a shop crew that's dealing with fixing fences and welding and that sort of thing. There's a cowboy crew that's managing the health and the well-being of the animals every day. There's feed mill and feed delivery operators, so people who are milling all the grains and who are delivering the feed to the bunks to the animals a couple of times a day. So, there's a lot of different departments, right?

But there's a hierarchy in terms of the work, just like in any workplace, right? We kind of have hierarchies. We're humans. We like hierarchy for some reason, but the same is true for the feedyard operation. And so sometimes, being on the cowboy crew so the people who are actually riding through pens every day, checking the health and well-being of the animals are sometimes seen kind of at the top of that hierarchy. An example of this self-organized system of safety is the "Cowboy as Teacher" system. So, the cowboy crew is seen as somebody who is a teacher, as a mentor, to other people who are who are working on the feedyard. Oftentimes they might say, well, go watch whoever is the cowboy and see what they do.

There's a lot of concerns just given the very limited workforce that is available and the shortage of labor that's available to feedyard operations. Both managers and workers talk about this lack of local labor, especially people who have agricultural experience. There are people who are coming into feedyards that have never worked a feedyard before. We hear a lot, especially from managers, they think that safety is supposed to be just common sense. "Why do you need to spend time on training and really focus on that when you shouldn't know it. It's just common sense." But if you haven't grown up in that that way of life, if you've never had anybody really guiding you through that type of work, it isn't common sense because you just don't know yet. That's one of the things that I think we are constantly having to reevaluate is how do you make these things feel a little bit more intuitive and a little bit more like common sense and they just come naturally.

And the final thing that we've learned about feedyard safety culture from our anthropologist team is that feedyards are often seen by workers as the last place to be a cowboy. If you think about what cultural notion of what it means to be a cowboy, it really doesn't exist anymore, and so this feedyard is the last place that you can do that. And for many of these folks that are working in the feedyard industry may include immigrant workers and other rural people. These are good jobs, and they're an opportunity to be able to really improve their lives in the future for their families, at least in the moment right now.

Well, what can we do to improve safety culture or in this case something that we can measure, so we'll call it safety climate? We can make sure that we're **praising workers** for behaving in a safe way and for recognizing hazards, right? We can really **help people to report** those near misses or those things that could have happened but didn't. We can make sure that we're **giving people safety and training instructions** at the time when they're hired, but also on a consistent basis throughout their employment. So, it shouldn't be the once-a-year annual compliance kind of check off and say yes, we did it, but actually make this an ongoing conversation with the workforce.

We can make sure that we have proper safety equipment that's always available and help workers to feel like they've got control over their personal safety. So, if things aren't safe, they should be refusing that work until we can get it into a way that can be safe for them to engage in that. We should be highlighting, as an employer, what are those dangerous working conditions or dangerous work practices and making sure that people are aware of those sorts of things, and just put a general emphasis on the importance of safety to management. This safety can be both top down and a bottom-up strategy. We need both to create a culture and a climate where people feel like they can work in a safe environment, so we'd encourage people to think about both the bottom-up and the top-down approaches that they could integrate into their own operations.

It's important for us as employers to make sure that we're clear on the purpose of what we're asking workers to do, and telling them, explaining to them, *why*. As human beings, we want to know why we need to do something, and typically if people understand the why behind it, they're more likely to engage in that type of behavior and the behavior that we want. We want to make sure we're treating people equitably and making sure that they have the things that they need. Sometimes that isn't one size fits all type of approach. Sometimes we need to have a more tailored and a more personalized approach to individuals who are part of our workforce.

We need to create more of a team environment where people feel valued and where they understand how their work connects to the bigger picture and there's no job that's more important than another, so it isn't about a competition of, well, I'm a cowboy and you're not. But how do we equalize those dynamics within the workplace and make people feel important and that we care about them and that we respect them? As a supervisor, I think it's important to promote accountability or as a leadership of any type of operation is to promote accountability and give very direct, specific feedback to help improve the things that are happening on the operation. We want to engage people in safety, so they feel like they have a voice and being part of the solution to making their workplace a better place for everybody.

Figuring out ways that you can have workers be involved in the safety planning process, maybe that's giving suggestions, developing strategies, picking out "what is the one most important thing that we need to fix right now?" There's a lot of things that can help us move from just a compliance standpoint to more of being an example. One of the things that our team is going to be working on over the next couple of years is really thinking about safety climate and how do we move from, "we're just getting by meeting those basic

requirements in terms of compliance” but really, to being a leader in the industry on safety issues and so hopefully we'll have a lot more tools and resources for everybody in the in the near future.

09:00 A. Proctor

What is the best way to communicate safety and health information to cattle feedyard workers?

09:12 A. Ramos

There's a lot of ways that you can communicate. We actually, in our research project, we actually ask worker, “how do you want to get health and safety information?” And what they told us is that they wanted to get it at work. They wanted to have people come in and do trainings and do presentations and that sort of thing on site as part of the work environment. However, they were also interested in videos that you could access at home, like through YouTube and that sort of thing. They were interested in in programs being offered in the community setting, sometimes.

Some of the mechanisms, their communication mechanisms, that they were least interested in were those that were associated with technology. For example, having online modules that you can go and complete on the computer or having an app that could be used on your smartphone-- those are things that they really weren't that interested in. What we found from our interactions with workers and with employers is that people like that face-to-face contact, and they like to be able to be together and to talk about these things and to have space, to talk about these things.

One of the things that we always recommend to employers is to make safety a priority and not just an annual compliance requirement, right? We should be consistently talking about safety, and it doesn't have to be a long, drawn-out hour-long presentation. It can be simple things, 5-, 10-minute just chat. “Hey, this is what we're planning on doing this week. We've got, you know, this number of head of cattle that are coming in. I want you to look out for XY&Z.” These are things that we can do pretty much on the fly. They're very low resource intensive.

I think there's a lot of opportunity and one of the things that we're trying to do here with our team is to be able to provide other tools. We heard that language was a big issue, English proficiency, and the limited English proficiency of many of the workers and the limited Spanish ability of many of the employers. So how do we meet that gap? That communication gap? We've been trying to create some resources that are bilingual.

One of the first things that we did is we started a picture glossary of safety related terminology on the feedyard in English and Spanish and people can have a graphic representation of these safety concerns. We've also created that in just a Word document where you have the English word and the Spanish word, much like a glossary so that people can go back and forth. But we heard communication was a big issue. And so, we're trying to meet that need with health and safety information. And of course, trying to get out in front of people and with groups and creating tools that trainers from feedyard operation can actually take and run with and do themselves.

11:57 A. Proctor

This is great, Dr. Ramos. We are so glad to share your safety glossary on our FarmSafe resources page, to go along with our podcast. It sounds like having this available will help improve the safety and the safety culture across our region. Thank you so much for sharing all the great work you are doing to help improve safety on cattle feedyards.

12:01 A. Ramos

You know if you keep me here long enough, I'll just think of more stuff.

12:08 A. Proctor

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

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's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, gpcah.org, or email us.

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Episode Resources

- [Safety Training in Feedyards](#), Athena Ramos Feature
- [Fatigue and the Need for Recovery among Latino/a Immigrant Cattle Feedyard Workers](#), A.K. Ramos, M. McGinley & G. Carlo
- [Cattle Feedyard Workers in Rural Nebraska](#), R.T. Klataske & C.G. Bendixsen
- [Cattle Feedyard Dictionary / Diccionario para Operaciones de Engorda](#), UNMC

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