

Episode Title: Special Episode: Remembering Paul Gunderson

Summary: This episode brings together some familiar voices to share special memories of our friend and colleague, Paul Gunderson, PhD. We also talk about ways in which we can stay safe on the farm in honor of Paul's memory. Paul, former director of the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, died last December at the age of 82.

Expert: In Memoriam: Paul Gunderson, PhD, former director of the National Farm Medicine Center along with voices of friends and colleagues of Paul's: T. Renee Anthony, GPCAH Director, Matt Nonnenmann, Barb Lee, Sanjay, Casper Bendixon, director of the National Farm Medicine Center

Episode Quote:

*"He was a farmer, and he knew equipment, he knew hazards, he knew exposures. And he was a good role model. He practiced **safe farming**."*

– Barbara Lee, PhD Director, National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety

Transcript

00:10 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.

R Anthony

I'm Renee Anthony, faculty at the University of Iowa College of Public Health. Paul Gunderson had been serving as external advisor to The Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health long before I had arrived at the university and long before I became involved in agricultural health at the Center. I first met Paul at the 2013 External Advisory Meeting that was held in conjunction with the ISASH meeting in Sandusky, Ohio. And, of course, whenever you meet Paul – it's always memorable. At that first meeting I had introduced the committee to our swine barn air quality project and Paul made a single comment that influenced my work with farmers going forward. He said that, and I'm quoting, "Tables that explain the impact of health and safety risks that are expressed in operational costs will endear you to producers." Well, of course, he was totally right and with this one statement he influenced all of our data presentation tables to make sure we were communicating the success of our interventions on health improvements and risk reduction, but always framing them in terms of actual costs – both capitol and maintenance – with respect to production impact.

Throughout the next ten years, Paul gave insights into his thoughts about the future of agriculture. About new directions that health and safety needs to consider. In 2015, Paul and the external directors were asked about their thoughts about future directions of ag centers. Paul predicted that the future of our Great Plains Center ag safety and health course – at the time called Agricultural Medicine Course – and gave comments on how the future of these sorts of courses would be distance learning. So he was prescient about how we would make that big switch to online virtual training in the not-to-distant future at that time.

He was always interested in emerging technologies and how they could be used to reduce the risks on the farm. These ranged from air quality sensors and control systems within buildings, wearable proximity sensors to warn of hazardous entry conditions, and also translating technology that was available and adopted in other industries to protect the farmer.

Our last face-to-face meeting was in June 2022, in my office. He was visiting and set up an appointment while he escorted his wife Harriet to medical appointments across the road here at the UI hospitals and clinics. We talked about his family, about the demands that COVID pandemic had on him and on his role as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. So, he's spent a lot of time with his community during times with COVID. But we also talked about his lifelong commitment to helping those who are helping farmers. While his enthusiasm, expertise, and kind heart will be missed, his contributions have helped frame the work of so many of us today.

M Nonnenmann

I think Paul was the former director of the Marshfield Clinic and I think that's where I first met him when I was starting out. Then he transitioned to closer to where he was from – North Dakota. But every conversation I ever had with Paul was, you know, he always wanted to mentor, provide good advice and guidance, to people who were starting out and he always was supportive of and interested in collaborating. When you have senior people that are experienced and you're just starting out- that's music to your ears – because it is intimidating to talk to people who are really experienced and you're just trying to find your way. He was always that way. I mean every time I talked to him. He was very kind and supportive and you just don't forget that. Other character aspects of Paul: he was very hard working. He tried to be very thoughtful and systematic in his approach to things. He was a great family person and always wanted to stay involved, even after he had moved on to a couple of other opportunities he still wanted to stay involved as much as he could. That's admirable. So, I try to emulate that by being supportive, helpful, and provide good mentorship to people who are wanting it and try to be a good collaborator. He's a great example to all of us who are continuing in the field. I think the other thing that always impressed me about Paul was that he seemed to have a pretty good feel at the producer level for ag safety and health – what the producers were interested in and what they would respond to. He seemed to have a good feel for that. Producers are changing over time – they've changed a lot since I started. Paul always seemed to be really thoughtful about that and I appreciate that. I wish his family the very best as they go through this time.

I think it's pretty important – I just met a few junior faculty members and you can see the panic in their eyes and they're like "How am I going to do all this?" It's important to help people find their way and get good feedback.

B Lee

I'll tell you a story about the [cowboy hat] that he always wears in the pictures. That was actually a gift to him from the National Academy of Sciences after he had chaired their review of NIOSH and it was a yearlong review. The people just love him so much. They had to do all these special measurements. They got the hat and it was just beautiful. It cost him – 2x a year he'd send it in for cleaning – it was like \$200 just to get it cleaned, so you can imagine just how much they spent on my hat. That was a first-class hat.

First of all, Paul spent 8 years in Marshfield. I knew him before Marshfield. The whole eight years I pretty much worked with him on things or under him or something because he had different positions. And then we kept working together afterwards. We were scheduled to have a Board of Directors meeting the day after he passed away. So, he worked right up to the day he passed away. I have so many memories. Some of mine are different than other people's because we'd see each other on a day-to-day basis and go out for dinner and knew each other's kids. What I didn't write down ... his wife, Harriet...Paul and I would travel and he would have a perfectly packed suitcase that Harriet always packed his suitcase for him. She prepared everything – all his paperwork for the travel-everything-. I always said "I need a Harriet" – my spouse was not going to pack my suitcase for me. and we'd always laugh about that. He had a really great love for his wife. When he had extra time he'd go shopping and he'd say, "Just stick with me." We had to go through ladies dept to get something for Harriet and I was like, "What a man!" It was so cool.

I would just say that the most remarkable thing that people say is that his overall demeanor was very personable and upbeat. It could be the worst day and he'd just chuckle and say, "Well, I'm not going to lose sleep over that one," even though the rest of us were losing sleep over it.

Not only his demeanor but his stature. He was a tall guy. And he'd stand like this ... and kind of laugh...that just made him as a human being pretty unique and special. There was something about his personality that for the most part people really got along with him... whether they were farmers, the director of NIOSH, or he was testifying in congress, people just liked Paul. He just had that way with people that was very effective.

He had this very extensive vocabulary – a very flowery way of talking – and we at work called it Gundersonese. We had a whole dictionary of Gundersonese. So, when he'd say, "And it seemed like the eagle was flying halfway across and he did a flip-flop or something," we're like, "Oh, I think I know what he means." The problem with that was that we'd come out of a department meeting and people would disagree about what he'd told us because it was so obtuse and so flowery...we're like, "This is what he meant." "No, I think this is what he meant." And we'd have to go back to him and say, "What exactly did you mean?" And we'd have to put it in our words so that he could say "yes" or "no, that's what I meant." So it was that Gundersonese that always flabbergasted us a lot. He continued that right up till the end – pontificating on things and saying these things that always sounded great, but we weren't always sure what he meant. We thought that was a unique thing that we had our own dictionary of Gundersonese.

He was very well-read in science and in agriculture, so you could bring up almost any topic and he could say, "Well, in the High Plains Journal two months ago they actually reported on this," or so and so from this location did some research on this topic which we should look up." So he was really well-read which fed into his ability to think about research and research questions, research methodologies, and I'd say just the role that he had in so many peer reviews: peer reviewing manuscripts, peer-reviewing for- he was the head of the NIOSH ag center reviews, he'd chair the committees, and he did these comprehensive reports for National Academy of Sciences, International Labor Organisation (writing up standards for that). He was not only a great thinker, but a great writer in capturing all of this stuff. I thought about this because, initially when I read his writing, and I would think like, "Geez, so many words to explain one little thing," but what I learned from that is that when you're writing a grant application you have to assume that the readers don't know what you are doing and don't know agriculture. You have to make these assumptions. That's what he taught me. You put all this stuff in there thinking that this is the first time the reader has been exposed to any of this. So that's something really important that he taught me.

He was a farmer and he knew equipment, he knew hazards, he knew exposures. And he was a good role model. He practiced safe farming. So, he was a really good role model. The other thing is ... After he moved back to North Dakota, he claimed he'd spend four or five mornings at the coffee shop. Chatting with the guys. So, it was through these coffee chats that he learned what's going on in the area, and what are their concerns, and then again use his knowledge of safety to share that with them. He did it very much at the grassroots level as a role model and communicator.

And then in North Dakota, with his role there, developing and working with extension in some actual outreach safety endeavors with farmers. And when we think of what was his biggest impact overall on this world of ag safety and health: it's really looking at the big picture and then his landmark article on suicide in farming in the Midwest. That was back in the 1980s so he was way ahead of his time in publishing that report that showed – it was during the financial crisis of the 1980s when farmers were really hit hard economically and his research demonstrated that the suicide rate in farmers was twice that of non-farmers. So, it was the first time that someone had actually raised that as an issue. So, it was really important.

A Proctor

What can we do to be safer on the farm in Paul's memory?

B Lee

I've got two suggestions. The first one is to work effectively with agribusiness and farm organizations to have really have a top-down approach and influence on safety that happens at the level of – whether it's corporate or family farm. I think Paul was working really effectively through ASCHA – working with the big organizations – American Farm Bureau Federation, National Council of Farmer Cooperatives – some of the big organizations and big insurance companies. They really appreciated Paul's ability to see things at all different levels and to push safety as we say through agents of influence who have the ability to put their expectations out there and people have to comply. The other thing is to really to pursue public policy options. To set standards. Set expectations and things like expanding the role of OSHA and Child Labor regulations to basically ensure that agriculture has the same level of safety standards as other industries.

Who inspires you to be a good role model?

Sanjay

I'm Sanjay from the Marshfield Health System. I'm the director for precision medical research. I've been at Marshfield for the last 25 years. And I've known Paul Gunderson since my first day on the job here. He hired me!

C Bendixon

I'm Casper Bendixon. Everyone calls me Cap. I direct the National Farm Medicine Center, which was formerly one of the homes of Paul's work. I've been in the field of health and safety for 9.5 years now and I was made aware of Paul's work immediately. My first memory was actually at an ASCHA conference and it was nice to have another cowboy hat in the room. The main thing that I was excited about sharing...Sanjay and I were fortunate enough to be part of one of Paul's last projects. Not only was it fun to work alongside such a great researcher with a great personality, but it was a really great project.

A Proctor

Sanjay how did you get involved?

Sanjay

Dr. Paul Gunderson hired me in 1998 and most of my research has dealt with MRSA which was a big problem in the hospital. Paul and I didn't have a common research project when he was a researcher, but when he moved on from here and had connections with University and basically what he talked about farm manure. So, Paul introduced me to the world of manure. I had no connection to manure. I had no connection to the cows. I had no connection to the day workers. And he basically had a project where he wanted to investigate how the cow manure holding tank Over time – to see how the microbiome changed during storage and also the antibody genes, you know, do they modify during storage and do they have any effect on the crops? He was working on a grant and he asked me...the beauty of Paul was that he was able to get money!

In 2015 or 2016 – I'm not in the department, so I asked Cap to help me out with that. It was fun work, basically. We were getting in the ponds, and getting manure – different samples. We wrote a paper with Paul in Biojournal three years ago. It was that type of project that we did with Paul ... exposure to the daily environment affects the farmers health. They are susceptible to GI illness. He had started the project and we went from there.

C Bendixon

I had met Paul and talked to him. One of the things that I admired about him: he was always thinking in terms of health of farmers and their health and safety, but he also thought about livestock. Not just the mechanics of injury or illness. For someone in the field to think holistically that way in the field, as an anthropologist, I really appreciate that. It's the value of the sum of the parts. This project in particular has repercussions for soil health animal and human health. Without even declaring himself as a OneHealth researcher, Paul was always thinking that way and I think that's the remarkable piece that I admired.

Sanjay

Another thing that I really appreciated about Paul is he was completely open to the idea that these environments aren't necessarily hazardous in every sense of the word. There might be some wellness to be found in some of these places, such as like a crowded dairy farmer worker nostril space where it's so competitive given the animal exposure and the feedstuffs, and the manure exposure there's no room for MRSA. There's no MRSA in those passageways – at least not in comparison to a non dairy worker. And with the GI stuff – the lack of GI symptoms in dairy workers is also interesting. And then also animal microbial resistance and that being translated over from calves to humans. But that all starts with all good research questions and curiosity which Paul was a pro when it came to good well-founded curiosity.

It was honestly for me the first time in my career that I've had to go out and collect manure samples. We took Paul with us at the end of the study and he was so grateful. He was so grateful that we mechanically got the project done with dairy farmers. We were collecting at the right depths and using techniques that made sense. The admiration that he had for us for getting the job done – it was just palpable that he was really proud of it. And, so, for someone who is junior in the field of agricultural health and safety – to have Paul Gunderson be proud of your work was a cool day for me.

He literally had the big ideas and wrote the grants and was fun to work with. He was also a priest part-time, and the director of strategic planning for the city where he lived last...can you image all those jobs? He'd come to Marshfield periodically and drop my office. He had unique folksy sayings, "I'll be motoring down to Iowa." I'd never heard that one before.

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.

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

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Episode Resources

- **In Memoriam: Paul Gunderson** (former director), [National Farm Medicine Center](#), Marshfield Clinic Research Institute
- [Manure Microbial Communities and Resistance Profiles Reconfigure after Transition to Manure Pits and Differ from Those in Fertilized Field Soil](#), Paper referred to by Shukla and Bendixsen
- [Papers by Paul Gunderson and Colleagues](#)

Photo

