

Episode Title: Women in Forestry

Summary: In this episode, we speak with Sabrina Keiper. Sabrina is a female forester working for Amana Forestry. Although she loves the work, being a woman in a male-dominated field comes with its challenges. Finding properly fitting PPE would help make the job easier and safer for Sabrina.

Expert: Sabrina Keiper

Episode Quote:

"I have to stand on my tippy toes and I'm 5'4". So that's like pretty average for like a female height, I feel. You can't sit back in [the seat] how you're supposed to [because] you won't be able to reach the pedals."

– Sabrina Keiper, Amana Forestry

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 firsthand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

00:15 A. Proctor

While the forestry industry has a fairly homogenous workforce, there has been more effort to increase the diversity in the occupation in recent years. Yet only 34% of the forestry workforce is women according to the USDA Forestry Service. We know that in agriculture and in forestry, women can experience disadvantages in equipment design and in personal protective equipment sizes, as products in these industries are often designed with male figures in mind. Today, we are getting insight as to what being a woman in forestry is like with Sabrina's first-hand experiences.

01:02 A. Proctor

Would you mind introducing yourself and sharing what led you to your current role in forestry?

01:08 S. Keiper

My name is Sabrina Keiper. I went to Iowa State for originally animal ecology, but then I added forestry on, and then I've just kind of focused more on forestry since I graduated. Graduated 2020, while I was there, I did a summer internship between my junior and senior year and that's what led me to Amana Forestry, which is where I currently work.

And then now I've been there for three years, total two years full time. So, I'm just one of the two foresters that they have there.

01:40 A. Proctor

Awesome. Thank you for explaining that. What are your day-to-day duties consist of?

01:45 S. Keiper

So, it's kind of different each day, which is honestly why I love the job so much. We get to do like a little bit of everything. It's more like seasonal differences than like day-to-day. We do a lot of tree plantings in the spring than when the fall comes around, we do a lot of our own logging cause we have 7000 acres that we manage. So, we have our own log splitters and stuff. So, we do a lot of that. And then we also get to decide if we have a sawmill to mill our own lumber. And then we also get to see it through the whole process of air drying, kiln drying and then we get to work with the furniture shop so that we can process it a little bit and do some skit planning and stuff and then sell it. This past year, we got to seed a couple, I think, 8 acres total in Prairie seeding, which is cool because we do some prescribed fires to keep those going.

And then lately we've been doing a lot of outreach.

02:42 A. Proctor

That's awesome. Sounds like you guys really do a little bit of everything.

02:47 S. Keiper

Yeah, that's honestly why I love like, I was looking for a job like this and I just kind of got lucky like my freshman year. We had a class where, like professionals in our field would come and talk like Ohh, how they got into it and stuff. They'd always be like, ohh, honestly, I just got lucky and me sitting there was like a freshman was. This is so unrealistic. Like, how can these people just be like, oh, I just got lucky, you know. And then now I'm like, well, you know, I just got lucky.

03:12 A. Proctor

It sounds like it worked out pretty great for.

S. Keiper- Yeah, it did. Yeah.

That's wonderful.

03:16 A. Proctor

Sabrina explains that within a forestry company, there are multiple roles, and some of these roles do not include hands on field work. For instance, in addition to the manual labor in the forest, there is administrative work in the office and lumber sales. Often, men do the manual labor work in the forest, while the female worker may work in lumber sales or the office. Sabrina explains how she works with a male forester and they both share manual labor tasks including operating the log splitter and running chainsaws. She mentions that at times she does feel outnumbered in the highly male-dominated industry. However, she is hopeful that there will be a rise in females employed in forestry and the gender demographic will grow as more outreach is done in schools to promote the job to young girls.

04:01 A. Proctor

In your opinion, what are changes to the forestry industry that might make it more inviting to women workers?

04:08 S. Keiper

I would say. A lot of it's mental and stigma of women shouldn't be there, so that's kind of hard to change. That's just a societal thing that we need to slowly chip away at. But as for like, physical things that could change, a lot of the machinery that you use in this field is not meant for females or just smaller people, I guess, in general. One of the things we do is we mill lumber, and the sight glass that you use so that you know you're cutting at the right number for like inches and stuff to be able to see clearly through it I have to stand on my tippy toes and I'm 5'4". So that's like pretty average for like a female height, I feel. You're just like always on your tippy toes when you're the one trying to mill, and then like the log splitter, you have to sit at the very front of the seat. You can't sit back into how you're supposed to sit in the seat or else you won't be able to reach the pedals and everything. And then, starting the chainsaw, we have two big chainsaws that we use a lot. And we have one that, I know this one I can start and the other one I can not. And like the main difference is that the pull cord to start it has been broken before so it's shorter than the other one. And since it's shorter like my arm can pull it all the way fully out so that it starts with the other one is like there's no way I always have to get him to start it and then I always feel like, ugh, man like why can't I start my own chainsaw. And then I feel horrible, but yeah.

05:43 A. Proctor

It sounds like the tools available to you and the buildings you work in haven't been adjusted to address smaller workers. Since the "average" US male is about 6 inches taller than the average US woman, it is not surprising that it may be hard to do the same job as others. The fields of human factors and ergonomics help businesses understand and design work that fit all body types, and these improvements should help improve the safety of female forestry workers.

Given these limitations, what advice do you have for women who are considering a career in forestry?

05:48 S. Keiper

I say go for it. Yeah, there's a lot of hurdles, but it's definitely a blast and I think a field worth pursuing. It's going to get better; I'm hopeful that it's going to get better. And I know that there's more females coming into forestry now, but you definitely need thick skin to be able to put up with everything. Be prepared to struggle with clothing. The men's section is your best friend. They just don't make women's clothes to last but men's clothes is OK, so.

06:22 A. Proctor

No, that's that's really helpful. Yeah, I know you mentioned earlier that you noticed that there's a difference in expectations between male and female workers in forestry. My final question is, is there anything you wish you knew sooner about working in a male dominated industry?

S. Keiper

When I went into it, I never, the thought never really didn't even cross my mind. Like, hey, you're going into a male dominated field. Make sure you're prepared.

But I would say, yeah, it's gonna be hard, but you will find out how much support you'll have. the amount of people who aren't in my field. But like in my regular, everyday lives, they are so supportive of the job that you do. And honestly, like, you never think that you're gonna inspire anybody. But then when you are in a male dominated field, you find that you do inspire people without really trying to.

07:41 A. Proctor

In August of 2020, Iowa experienced a derecho. This was a widespread, long-lived windstorm that passed through Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana. In eastern Iowa, winds of 126 miles per hour damaged crops, houses, and utility services, and knocked down many trees, hundreds of thousands in Cedar Rapids Iowa alone. I assume that as a forestry expert, your skills were highly sought after.

08:08 S. Keiper

After the Derecho, I was helping some family and friends of the family. I was the only one running a chainsaw that wasn't my dad or uncle was like, older guys. There were some other females there, but they were picking up the branches and stuff. During the water break, they were like, I'm so happy you could come. It's so cool seeing you run a chainsaw with all the other guys and I'm so happy my daughters are here to see you do that and it's just a very heart touching moment. So, you will inspire people without trying to, but that's a benefit of being in the male dominated field.

And then I guess I just wish I knew how to adapt more or not adapt more but like that I knew that I would need to adapt.

You need to figure out different ways to do certain things, cause you might not be as strong as the other people, but there's other ways to like move lumber around or something that you just don't think about. I think that a lot of the females in male dominated fields just have to get the same amount of stuff done in the same amount of time, just how they do it might be a little bit different, but they'll still get it done.

09:11 A. Proctor

Thank you, again, Sabrina, for taking time out of your schedule to sharing your perspectives on unique safety concerns facing women in forestry.

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

- [Logging Forestry Safety Series](#)
- [Additional information on fitting the tool to the job and considerations for women in ag, forestry and fishing](#)
- [Additional information for health and safety relevant to working women in the agricultural sector](#)

Photo

