

Episode Title: Exploring the Multi-Generational Perspective on Health and Safety with the Millennial Farmer

Topic: How Perspectives on Health and Safety on the Farm Have Shifted Over Generations of Farmers

Episode Summary: Zach Johnson is the Minnesota Millennial Farmer. His YouTube account has over 1 million dedicated subscribers, and he is passionate about ag education-- as are we! He has used his channel to promote organizations like Farm Rescue and Nationwide, who hosts Grain Bin Safety Week. He has shared videos on grain entrapment and rescue that lead to more shared stories in the comments below.

Special Guest: Zach Johnson, Millennial Farmer

Episode Quote:

"The more you're thinking about safety, the more it'll kind of become second nature."

– Zach Johnson, Millennial Farmer

Transcript

00:10 E Presnall

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.

00:32 E Presnall

We are kicking off May with our guest, Millennial Farmer Zach Johnson. Zach is a sixth-generational farmer, and he is the face of Millennial Farmer on YouTube with his wife, kids, and dogs. The channel has 1 million+ subscribers that keep coming back for Zach's dry humor and quick wit.

00:52 E Presnall

While talking with Zach, we explored topics related to the multi-generational perspective on health and safety among farmers, including how the dangers of farming have changed alongside advancements in the field and the greatest safety concerns that farmers face today.

01:06 *FarmSafe* Music

01:09 E Presnall

So, I just wanted to ask you, how did you get started with doing the Millennial Farmer YouTube channel?

01:17 Z Johnson

So, I started basically because I was seeing a lot of things online, mostly with farming, stuff about farming coming from people that I knew, even family members and people that grew up in the rural areas, who were saying things about farming and sort of had these preconceived ideas about farming that weren't exactly correct. They had questions about what we're using for seed and what we're using for pesticides or herbicides and like what we're doing with livestock and irrigation and all that. And I was seeing a lot of things that weren't really true. A lot of the negativity that was out there and what I wanted to do really was to bring to life what exactly it is that we do on the farm and not really hide anything and just show people that, hey, I am a farmer, this is my family farm. This is what we do and when we use things like pesticides and installed drain tile, this is why we choose to do those things and why we use the management practices that we use.

02:12 E Presnall

And how do you talk to your audience about health and safety?

02:17 Z Johnson

Well, the biggest way is just to show them what we're doing on the farm, I guess. And when when things like that come up, you know, if we have to handle chemicals, we wear gloves and we wear the PPE equipment. When I climb in a bin, I haven't always been the best but when I climb in the bin, I certainly try to try to show that I have a harness. I wear a harness. I wear a mask. We try to stay away from the power sweeps and that sort of thing. And certainly, I've got the kids around the farm a lot, like a lot of farms do. And so, we try to show that, you know, we're always concerned and always kind of watching out and making sure that everybody understands that the farm is a busy, moving, functioning place and you have to watch out for your own safety as much or more than the people that are actually in the equipment and the machinery as well.

03:02 E Presnall

So, that brings up a good question. Are there things that you do to keep your kids safe on the farm that maybe your parents didn't do for you?

03:11 Z Johnson

My kids are getting a little bit a little bit older now, a little bit bigger, but the big one that we have with my daughter, Isla, who is the youngest one, she's 8 now, but we have an area of grass around the house that we call the main lawn and she's not allowed if we're working in the yard, she's not allowed to leave the grass area and come on to the driveway or the roads without waving at us or calling us or making sure that we see her first. And so, she's going to have to yell at us and wave and we can wave back and let her out. That's one way that we know, you know, she's not down in the yard. And she's been really good about kind of obeying that rule and making sure that she follows that. Otherwise, I really, I try to lead by example and let them know that lot of things can happen around here. So, the more you're thinking about safety, the more it'll kind of become second nature.

03:58 E Presnall

And where do you hear a lot of your health and safety information?

04:04 Z Johnson

Honestly, I think a lot of it just comes generally from being around farming my whole life. I don't have a specific place or a specific resource that I go to to follow safety guidelines that are coming out, but I just kind of know from being around at my whole life that there are so many different dangers around. And so, when you're handling heavy things or you're leaning something against the wall, or you're dealing with a PTO shaft or you're moving chemicals around. It's kind of always in the back of your mind, the different things that can happen when it comes to some of these different things that we have on the farm for managing this place.

04:38 E Presnall

Are there differences in the safety and health practices between the generations on your farm?

04:44 Z Johnson

You know, I'm sure there are. If you go back a couple of grandfathers or three grandpas, for sure, they weren't worried about having heavy machinery and semis coming in and out all the time and probably back then they weren't even worried about the different chemicals and the pesticides that we have around. And some of them we need to worry about quite a bit. And some of them we don't. They didn't have near the amount of moving equipment, I suppose., around the farm But I think a lot of that shows as well in the statistics. When you look at farm safety and the health of the families on the farms now compared to, 30-40, fifty, 100 years ago, I mean every farm had ten kids and unfortunately they had some that had been injured on the farm, right. And a lot of farmers, grandparents are, you know, grandpas missing a couple of fingers or an arm or whatever it might be so.

Z Johnson

I think a lot of that is really showing as we move forward that we're able to handle the larger equipment and we're able to be more efficient and do a lot more around the farm and still hopefully have less unfortunate accidents than what we had 100 years ago.

05:47 E Presnall

The dangers of farming have kind of changed, as we have, you know, have all this new machinery and ways of doing things more efficiently and so kind of adapting to that is interesting. In your experience or in your personal opinion, what are the biggest challenges in terms of health and safety that farmers face today, do you think?

06:10 Z Johnson

I think, at least in my region, the grain bins are a huge, huge concern. You know, I can't think of another specific thing on the farm that I hear about so frequently when it comes to injuries or worse, especially up in Minnesota and the Dakotas, there are so many grain bins out here and it just seems like I'm constantly hearing about another accident inside a grain bin. It's, it's an issue and I know as well as anybody how inconvenient it can be to put that safety harness on or to wait for that other person to get there or to figure out the long way around unplugging and auger those kinds of things. I know that that's very difficult and I'm not always the best example of safety when it comes to that, but we all need to remember the real dangers that are there, and I think we all have heard those statistics and heard about the injuries. I really think the grain bins seem to me like they are kind of the unfortunate shining example of the biggest danger nowadays on the farm.

07:19 E Presnall

I mean, I completely agree. As health and safety people, to me it seems like the biggest challenge. We just did a whole series on grain bin safety and it's challenging to figure out why people are reluctant to keep that safety in mind when it comes to grain bins and the numbers just keep rising. So, it's something that we're definitely talking about and just trying to figure out what are different ways to kind of get people to really get it and to start making some changes to their behavior, for sure.

07:54 Z Johnson

Yeah, absolutely.

07:57 E Presnall

How do you keep your audience engaged in your videos?

08:02 Z Johnson

I find that there really is 2 parts to my videos kind of without thinking about it. There are two different things, and the first one was the piece that I talked about initially when it came to starting the videos and that was the educational side of things. And I want to educate people as far as what happens on the farms and what it is exactly that we're doing out here and why we use the practices that we use. But in order to do that, I find that the best way to educate people about that is to make sure that there's some entertainment value to the videos. Everybody can remember back and think about when the science teacher would roll the old black and white TV and play the boring video, right. And I think it was so much more obvious that we all learned so much better if we actually got out the Bunsen burners and did the work ourselves in science class. So, I think it's a lot that way also when it comes to my videos where instead of me talking about drain tile or pesticides or GMO seed, I think it's easier to teach people about that because it's more entertaining if I'm actually installing drain tile or planting genetically modified seed, right, or actually applying herbicides with the sprayer. There's so much more value to that entertainment, whether we even know it or not, where it's almost like, you know you don't want to go overboard with either side, right? But I almost don't want people to even know that they are learning about farming as we go. I just want them to be interested in watching the process happen and then if they're interested in that and they're going to watch more and more and more, they're going to learn about farming without me having to, you know, pretend like I'm the educator and I'm having to teach them something if they're entertained by it, they'll keep coming back and they'll start to understand about farming.

09:53 E Presnall

Yeah, that's good.

How do you, a sixth generational farmer, approach concerns that you may have about how to keep the farm in your family?

10:07 Z Johnson

Oh, that's a loaded question there.

10:09 E Presnall

I know.

10:10 Z Johnson

Boy so. Right now, my dad is 65 years old. I'm 39, and I kind of know relatively well, how the farm is set up right now in the event that something would happen to my parents. So, I have one sibling I've got a brother that does not farm, so he's not on the farm, but he's certainly entitled to some inheritance there as well. I do know how that is kind of set up and my parents have done a really good job as far as working with attorneys and future planning people and setting that up right for success, because my parents want the farm to continue. They also want to make sure that they treat my brother fairly and I'm lucky I'm in a position and in a family where we all get along very well. I don't foresee any problems with any of that, but I think that we're all on the same page as far as treating each other fairly.

11:04 Z Johnson

I'm kind of just now getting to the point where I'm starting to think of it a little bit as far as, when I am 60, 70, 80 years old, what happens with what I've built from this point and how do I make sure that I can fairly pass that on to my children and make sure that the farm is also set up for success. It's so important to me and I know to my parents as well that the farm has the opportunity to continue. So, when there are siblings that decide to farm and don't decide to farm it kind of- It forces you to look at things a little bit of a different way, and I certainly don't have all the answers because every farm is a little bit different, but I know that that is a, I think that's a big concern for American farmers right now. And I think it always has been. But I think as we go, it becomes more and more of a concern. One, because of the aging population or the aging. Yeah, the aging population of farmers, right. The average age now in Minnesota, I think is up over 48, the average of 58, I mean the average age of a farmer. That's one thing.

12:12 Z Johnson

But the other thing that I think we don't talk enough about and as somebody who's still relatively young and trying to figure my way 100% into this thing is the numbers and the dollars and the amount that it takes to take over these farms. You know, my dad's 65 years old, but I certainly hope he's still around for a long time and so, how do I move into a position where I have 100% control of this farm? You know, if that's his goal and my goal, how do I do that when the dollars are so big and he's been able to create what he has over his lifetime and then secondary to that, if I'm successful at that, how do I make sure at that point that I can pass on what's hopefully an even larger and more successful farm to my children? I really think things are getting quite complicated because we're talking about some big dollars here when it comes to the assets that are necessary to run the type of farm that we run here with my family. Again, I don't have all the answers, but I think making sure you contact the right people and that you get on top of it ahead of time, I think are the big, the big keys, right? And like I say, I'm, I'm lucky my dad is 65 years old. My parents have been thinking about it for 15 years. They're well on their way or well into the process of transferring the farm. Hopefully some of that is some stuff that I'll learn as far as transferring some of the stuff to my kids, but it's so important. Farmers just we love what we do. We take so much pride in what we do, and I know most farms are the same as us. We're it's important to us that the next generation has the opportunity to continue the farm if that's what they want to do.

13:57 E Presnall

Yeah. And I think that is kind of the other side of the coin there is, unfortunately, it seems like there's less and less younger people who are interested in farming. I'm sure anyone who farms doesn't want any of their children to feel obligated to continue farming and that's why I think it's videos like you put out can hopefully get younger generations excited about farming again and interested in it.

14:26 Z Johnson

Yeah, absolutely. And I know I've heard some stories where I know that that's been successful where young people will decide that they want to come back to the farm. And a lot of that has to do with how popular farming has become on social media and they're able to really see what the farm life is all about. It's cool, it's very cool to be a part of. It's exciting to see some younger people really

taking an interest in the farm that may not have before I think overall, I think agriculture is going to be in good hands. I see a lot of a lot of great things coming.

14:45 E Presnall

Yeah, I agree. I my family farms and I didn't really have too much of an interest in it at all in high school and really in my undergrad of college. And it kind of has come full circle. And I'm now back working within the field of agriculture. It's kind of cool, I think, even if people shy away from it for a little bit, it seems like they tend to come back to it. That's pretty cool too.

15:21 Z Johnson

Yeah, everybody gets drawn back to it one way or another it seems.

15:22 E Presnall

It can be helpful to think about how advancements in farming have shifted the focus of agricultural safety and health. Health and safety concerns of past generations of farmers may not be the same as current and future concerns that the field faces. Perspectives on health and safety among farmers may also change from generation to generation. Take some time to consider what your perspective on health and safety is and whether or not you have made it a priority on your farm. Think about how you have conversations about health and safety and whether or not those conversations have been effective at reducing injury and illness.

15:58 *FarmSafe* Music**16:02 Z Johnson**

Listen in on the *FarmSafe* podcast to join in on the conversation about keeping safe on 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 e-mail us.

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 Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health.

Episode Resources

- <https://farmrescue.org/>
- **Constructing a Farm Succession Plan:** <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/wholefarm/html/c4-17.html>
- **Millennial Farmer YouTube Page:** <https://www.youtube.com/@MillennialFarmer>

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