

**Episode Title:** Burning Issues: Fire Safety on the Farm

**Topics:** Fire Risks Unique to Farming and How to Prevent Them

**Summary:** In this episode, we're joined by Fire Chief Jerry Minor, who shares invaluable insights on fire safety and prevention specifically tailored for farms. With years of experience in fire management, Jerry Minor discusses the unique fire risks that farmers face and offers expert advice on how to minimize those dangers. From understanding the importance of proper equipment maintenance and fire-resistant materials to creating fire safety plans and emergency response strategies, this episode covers everything you need to know to keep your farm safe. Whether you run a small family farm or a large operation, these practical tips will help protect your land, animals, and livelihood from the threat of fire.

**Expert:** Jerry Minor

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**Episode Quote:**

*"We're not there to do an inspection. We're there to try to find what can hurt us and is there something we can do to prevent that? Because if it'll prevent hurting the farmer, the family, and the employees of the farm."*

– Jerry Minor, Pittsville (WI) Fire Chief

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## Transcript

### 00:10 E Ritchie

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.

Farming can be an incredibly rewarding and fulfilling life, but it also comes with its own set of unique risks— especially when it comes to fire hazards. Whether it's from dry fields, faulty equipment, or even spontaneous combustion in grain bins, fire can spread quickly and cause devastating damage.

### 00:52 E Ritchie

In today's episode, we'll be talking about the steps farmers can take to prevent fires before they start, how to handle fire risks during peak seasons, and the best safety practices to protect your farm, your livelihood, and your loved ones. From understanding fire risks on your farm to creating emergency plans, we'll cover everything you need to know to keep your farm safe.

### 01:18 E Ritchie

The Telling the Story Project is a collaborative effort of several NIOSH-Funded Ag centers across the Midwest. We will share this link in this episode's resources.

The Telling the Story Project features injury prevention messages that highlight personal stories and first-hand experiences of farmers, agricultural workers, family and community members who have been impacted by injuries, fatalities, or close calls. Today, we will share Leon Sheets' story to highlight his personal experience with facing the aftermath of a flash fire in his swine building.

### 01:54 L Sheets

I'm Leon Sheets, a pig farmer from Chickasaw County in northeast Iowa with an Ionia address. But we're on my farm this afternoon talking a little bit about safety when walking and working in our barns. We've talked about the issues of the foaming pits and safety, particularly when we're pumping. But there's another time to start to show up drastically. When we're doing maintenance or washing in our barns.

### 02:18 L Sheets

Let me reiterate what happened in my farm last September 15th, 2014, we'd finished loading out my barn. The previous week I had washed out two of the rooms. One of the rooms, like a lot of the barns with the foaming issue, had had some foam on it. The other three were fine.

#### 02:35 L Sheets

Late in the afternoon, about 4:00, I came back to check the check, the barns, and to readjust the soakers for the night, and on a whim in that work area, which is 8 by 40 with the standing pilot, I looked at the washer and I said I will just wash this floor, just get it soaking wet. Just take the wand and 8 by 40 a couple three passes with the washer and I'm out. I wasn't at it very long and all of a sudden there was a [a] ball of fire, a loud kaboom, and I really couldn't see. The door was blown open and drastic changes happened in my life. By the time I put the pressure washer down, I'd knock some fire down. Turned the machine off my bio security bench wasn't there and I don't know whether the door was blown open or blown off, but it wasn't there. My coveralls had hot cinders on the spot. I could see it was the glow. And by the time I did the stop, drop and roll, got the generator shed and did the safety per code of calls of getting the power turned off. The stop on the generator and then going ahead and getting the LP turned off and then it was time to call 911. Is that the fire itself in that work area the flames were put out, but something happened with the gas, is that before I got to the end of the building, black smoke was coming out. I could hear the ceiling talk to it.

#### 03:54 E Ritchie

We're excited to bring you insights from Jerry Minor, the Chief of the Pittsville Fire Department. Jerry has responded to countless emergencies throughout his career, becoming a trusted figure in his community. Recently, he was honored as Wisconsin Farm Bureau's Hero of Hope, recognizing his remarkable contributions to the agricultural community during challenging times. Through the Heroes of Hope campaign, Jerry exemplifies how one person can make a significant impact, providing not just safety but also a sense of hope to farmers and businesses alike.

#### 04:32 J Minor

My name is Jerry Minor. I'm the chief at Pittsville fire department. We're a combination fire department. So, we have full time part time paid on call and fully volunteer staff. We do fire and EMS response in a 300 square mile area, primarily rural. We now have more of the larger operations, the thousand, 2000 cow operations here in this county. I've been doing this for 46 years this year, been involved with the National Farm Medicine Center, who does a lot of the agricultural prevention and training with my folks since 1981.

#### 05:11 E Ritchie

So, could you walk me through some of the common tasks that farmers do that have the greatest risk of fire or burn injuries?

#### 05:20 J Minor

The stuff that we've seen over the years related to fires and injuries on a farm, hot work is usually one of the big things working in the shop and because of sparks etc. Getting into petroleum products, starting a fire. I don't want to say that's the most common, but that's where we would see injuries trying to do fire suppression without adequate equipment. And again, nobody's dressed for that. That's probably the biggest thing.

#### 05:50 J Minor

Electrical burns. Perhaps. We have a lot of people that like to do their own electrical work, and I'll talk about that as not necessarily a good thing. And the other thing we see on farms and we're not seeing as many as we used to is spontaneous combustion fires in mounds. When people went to the large round bales, it got the fire out of the barn so to speak. But they still happen from time to time. Now we have large tail fighters out in the field, which you know certainly better than having them in the building, but those are the ones that have caused the largest numbers of injuries.

#### 06:28 J Minor

Individual fires in equipment combines still seem to be the number one thing harvesting in the fall combines dusty, dirty grease, not cleaning them between the harvest. We see two or three combines burn up or have significant fire in them every season, so those are pretty common as well.

**06:49 E Ritchie**

So, in terms of prevention, can you talk about what Farm Hazard analysis is and how it relates to prevention of fires on farms?

**06:59 J Minor**

A Farm Hazard analysis wouldn't be any different than we would do in industry. We look at what is the operation and what parts of it can cause injury to the workers? Farm Hazard analysis is also a tool that we use in a program called RF Dash. Real firefighters delivering agricultural safety and health. Where we look at the farm overall. We look at the buildings to see where our potential problems that could cause injury or death or create fires in this case. We look at implements for example, do they have slow moving vehicle signs on them? Do they have shields where there are supposed to be shields? So, when you do that you analyze the data to show where corrections can be made to hopefully relate to injury prevention, if we take away the problem, we should take away the injury. At least that's the theory and, quite frankly, it works.

**08:02 J Minor**

It's impossible to take away everything. There are freakish things that happen from time to time that we can't prevent, but overall, I think we can reduce the number of injuries that we see on farms significantly if everybody does a hazard analysis.

**08:20 J Minor**

A way that we also like to do it is get the farm community to invite the fire department out to the farm. Years ago, we had more firefighters that were farmers than we do today, so the familiarity of what is a farm and how it operates wasn't something that was a big problem in smaller fire departments. Today it's a bigger problem because we don't have those numbers of staff anymore and the number of people that I see that work on the farm and our firefighters in my department, I only have two people or three people right now that fall into that category and years ago would be almost half the department. And that relates to my neighboring agencies as well. So, our familiarity with what goes on the farm and the things that are there that can hurt the employees of the farm are the same things that can hurt my fire fighters, so we want to come out to farms and look for hazards. We're not there to do an inspection. We're there to try to find what can hurt us and is there something we can do to prevent that? Because if it'll prevent hurting us, it'll prevent hurting the farmer, the family, the employees of the farm.

**09:30 J Minor**

So, Hazard analysis is something that we should do on all kinds of things. The farm is a unique is a unique place because a lot of people do not have that experience. So, that's a marriage that we've been trying to develop for a number of years and it works.

**09:48 E Ritchie**

Why is fire safety planning important?

**09:51 J Minor**

One of the things we don't see very often when you walk into a barn, you don't find the MSDS's or the SDS's. And here's the evacuation plan. You don't find that on farms. Does that mean we shouldn't do them? No, we should do them. Especially maybe when mom and pop just ran the farm. They knew where everything was. It wasn't a big problem. The family grew up on the farm. They knew where everything was well. Today, when we have a lot of different workers on farms, younger folks working on farms, we have a lot of Hispanic workers here in central Wisconsin on farms. The familiarity with everything about the operation is not there, so a safety plan again gets us to look at the overall picture, where are potential problems that could injure my family, my employees, my firefighters, and let's eliminate those ahead of time.

**10:46 J Minor**

The other part of the plan is knowing what other information the Fire department's going to need: is your address clearly marked out in front of the property, where the person is injured, easy to find or drive to. You know, when we pull into a farm complex, it's really no different than pulling into a large industrial complex in a city, multiple buildings, buildings are not always identified. Do you letter your buildings, number your buildings, you know, go to building 3, south door.

**11:19 J Minor**

Any of those things that can be done ahead of time give us an easier access to the patient and other things on the farm. Where is a meeting place in the event of inclement weather? We worry about tornadoes here and tornado season in the Midwest, there are places that are safe to be during a tornado. Do all of your employees know where to go, and then after the incident is over or as it begins, is everybody accounted for? If somebody was disking in the back forty, well, where are they now? Are they still there? Are they in a creek bottom somewhere or where are they? So, all these things put into a plan gives us a check off a guide to make sure everybody stays safe.

**12:01 J Minor**

Whether it's just locating all the employees or a part of a prevention program, both really important. We don't see a lot of them. I wish we would see more, but again, it's not a mandated thing, but we can tell you from a response side of it when you pull on to a big operation and there's nobody there to meet you, it's a problem.

**12:23 E Ritchie**

How can individuals ensure that emergency services has easy access to all buildings and areas they need to get to?

**12:31 J Minor**

You know, we pull into a lot of farmyards that are just full of everything equipment, last year's equipment, this pile of this and this pile of that, that's pretty normal. If you can't drive yourself to the building, we can't either. If you can't walk with a wheelbarrow to get into a building. I can't get an ambulance cot in there. So put yourself in our shoes for a minute and if you can't drive the tractor up to the building, well, I have a hard time getting a fire engine and fire engines are usually pretty good size. If there's a lot of debris in the yard, it's a problem. And nobody ever thinks they're going to have a fire until it happens, and then it's too late.

**13:15 J Minor**

Access around buildings is important because we don't always go through the front door knowing where utilities are and shutting them off is also important, and that can be also part of our pre plan. We also have another program called Farm Mapper. Farm Mapper gets the fire department on the farm ahead of time and we map all of these things. Here's the electric shut off. Here's where the LP tanks are located. Here's where the meeting place is. All of that is done in a pre-planned format so that I'm in route to your farm. I can pull that up and it gives me the information I normally need.

**13:53 J Minor**

Who is your veterinarian? Who do you use for your feed supply? All those types of things that we may need to contact. So, getting access not only physically, but to other information about the farm is important, especially during an incident when you call and report somebody injured and they're not specifically at the address up front, you need to give us directions. They're in the back 40 off of the next Rd. up, whatever. Whatever. Have people out by the road to flag us in and tell us ahead of time if you can. They're in the woods. They're across 80 acres of plowed field. Ambulances don't do well across plowed fields, but we have all terrain vehicles that we can respond in with that get us that access. Again, I want to know that stuff on the call initially right up front so the corporate equipment can be dispatched.

**14:49 E Ritchie**

So, I just have one last thing to kind of wrap it up. Are there any additional items that you would recommend that are essential to keep on the farm in the event of a fire?

**15:00 J Minor**

Access for fire equipment is a big deal today. We recommend driveways that have a 14-foot-wide area with 14 feet of clearance on top as well. We have to look for overhead wires. A lot of these things we can see ahead of time if we map the farm.

**15:20 J Minor**

And working with your fire department is huge. You know they're not coming out to write citations. They're coming out to look at what's there. The first time they do, it shouldn't be at 3:00 AM.

#### 15:34 E Ritchie

As we've discussed, fire can be one of the most devastating risks on the farm, but with the right knowledge, preparation, and vigilance, we can prevent disasters before they start. In the resources for this episode, I have included the links to FarmMapper and Safer Farm, two common farm hazard mapping tools. You can also find the link to the RF-DASH webpage as well as a Farm Fire Prevention Guide, created by I-CASH.

#### 16:16 E Ritchie

For this episode, I would like for all our listeners who live or work on a farm, to make sure that your farm is accessible to EMS and Fire Services. This includes making sure that the farm's address is clear and visible, paths to all buildings and other work areas are clear, and that the main entry point to the farm has a 14-foot side-to-side and overhead clearance for fire equipment.

A little preparation goes a long way. Whether it's maintaining your equipment, having firebreaks in place, or creating a solid emergency plan, the steps you take today can help safeguard your farm and your family for tomorrow. We hope you found this information helpful, and that it empowers you to take proactive steps to protect your farm.

#### 17:04 E Ritchie

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](http://gpcah.org), or email us.

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

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## Episode Resources

- [RF-DASH Webpage](#)
- [The Telling the Story Project](#), Leon Sheets
- [Farm Mapper](#)
- [Safer Farm](#)
- [Farm Fire Prevention Guide](#), I-CASH

## Photo

