

Last Word

Enough is Enough

Rural leaders must take a stand to end childhood fatalities on farms

John Shutske

During the past 18 months, numerous children have died of traumatic agricultural injuries in Minnesota and other areas of the United States.

Each year we lose about 100 children in the U.S. farm workplace to machinery entanglements, equipment run overs, livestock encounters, drowning and other hazardous situations. However, the last year and a half's deaths and injuries have increased focus on this issue and brought the childhood injury in agriculture phenomena into a new public light.

- In September 2000, during National Farm Safety and Health Week, 3-year-old Parker Sebens suffered a double arm amputation in a grain auger on his family's farm in North Dakota.

- In early 2001, a Perry County Pennsylvania attorney brought charges against a 3-year-old's parent. This child was run over by a tractor after falling out of its front-end loader bucket while the tractor traveled on a rural highway. The charges included recklessly endangering another person and endangering the welfare of a minor.

- In late summer 2001, a northwest Minnesota dairy farm family's 3-year-old adopted son drowned after wandering into a lake while his parents were milking cows nearby. Tragically, this family years before had two other children drown in the same lake under similar circumstances.

As an ASAE member, extension safety specialist, parent and advocate for child safety and protection, these events sadden and frustrate me. For more than 10 years, our program at the University of Minnesota has been among the leaders in the country developing child farm safety programs such as day camps, tractor driving schools and other events to help children understand and avoid common farm hazards. We have also worked hard to help parents understand that children have certain physical, decision-making and information-processing limitations that make them vulnerable to injury. We encourage parents to wait until children are a few years older before allowing them to do some farm tasks.

Our biggest struggle has been the issue of educating families about the younger children, including toddlers, who may not be working on the farm but are exposed to farm hazards. For example, three-year-old Matthew

Scheffert in October 2000 drowned in 15 inches of water and manure in a runoff gutter at the end of a livestock feedlot. His father was working nearby.

We struggle with helping farm families and rural communities understand that a farm is a dangerous industrial workplace. The farm is fraught with the same hazards found in a factory, construction site or mine.

Many have suggested new child protection laws or better enforcement of existing laws when a preventable incident occurs. An example is the action in Pennsylvania, which resulted in probation for the victim's parent.

Should agricultural engineers take a more active role in designing work sites assuming that young children could be present? In my opinion, given the range of hazards that exist and the inherent dangers in a farming environment, this is not a feasible or reasonable solution.

There may be simple interventions and design solutions to prevent some tragedies. Child-proof and drip-proof dairy pipeline cleaner containers and pumps are examples. But to expect an agricultural engineer to design a livestock facility, grain storage structure or machine that will prevent injury to a young child seems an unreasonable expectation.

Educational programs and awareness, regardless of the source, can only go so far. If we really expect these tragedies to stop, farm families and leaders of rural United States must take a tough stand and say, "Enough is enough!" Community leaders must partner with farm families to get at the real roots of these issues and help find acceptable, effective, appropriate solutions.

Within the past five years, 25 children under 16 died in Minnesota working or playing in the farm workplace. Until farm parents, influential agricultural organizations and other leaders take a stand and focus on the underlying issues that contribute to these tragedies, farming will continue to be one of the nation's most dangerous industries. **R**

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