

Catching up with Our Neighbors

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In 1993, as the agricultural safety and health movement was gaining momentum in developed countries, Australia and Canada adopted similar approaches to substantially improve working conditions for agricultural workers. Now with a 13-year track record, both Australia and Canada have successful national coalitions of leaders in agribusinesses, agricultural organizations, federal and state/province entities, and other groups to set and implement national strategies. These two countries report notable success in reducing agricultural injuries and fatalities, implementing successful worker training programs, securing national and private sector funding for priority tasks (e.g., tracking injury trends), improving relations across competing commodity groups, and handling policy issues (both avoidance of undesired policies and adoption of desired farm safety policies).

Conversations with leaders of FarmSafe Australia, Inc. (www.farmsafe.org.au) and the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (www.casa-acsa.ca/english; formerly known as the Coalition for Agricultural Safety and Rural Health) revealed that each group had a slow and sometimes tenuous startup phase. They weathered initial problems, and they modified their infrastructure and policies along the way. They now believe they have a practical and effective national approach for improving health and safety for agricultural workers. Furthermore, their annual conferences provide valuable opportunities for open communications between producers, organizations, and safety professionals.

The time has come to determine whether or not agriculture industry leaders in the U.S. are interested and willing to pursue national strategies for worker health and safety via a national coalition. Although vast differences exist between U.S. agriculture systems and those of Australia and Canada, we believe there is potential benefit in modeling a U.S. system based on the successes and challenges encountered in those countries. We know that the key ingredient to their current success has been a coalition that is largely led by representatives of production agriculture.

Imagine if the U.S. had one unified voice for agricultural safety and health. We would have a formal network of organization leaders, weighted heavily with production agriculture representatives, who would guide national policies and industry standards while influencing international decisions affecting agricultural workers' health and safety. Outcomes from the unified voice of a U.S. coalition might include:

- Farm Bill policies that subsidize safety investments and "conservation of workers."
- Annual U.S. agricultural injury and fatality statistics that highlight emerging issues and priorities for interventions.
- A national ROPS retrofit initiative with phased-in mandatory ROPS regulations.

- Improved training systems for immigrant farmworkers.
- Affordable, accessible off-farm childcare programs.

Many stakeholders would benefit from such a national coalition. In this case, the primary stakeholders are workers in all sectors of production agriculture. The leaders driving the actions and recommendations of the coalition would be from within the industry, working with cooperative extension, academic, and government agencies to effectively match timely health and safety issues with research and programs.

A preliminary meeting to gauge interest in this concept was convened during the 2006 National Institute for Farm Safety annual conference in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Individuals at the table represented the National Council of Agricultural Employers, American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers, Workers Compensation Fund (Utah), Migrant Clinicians Network, National Institute for Farm Safety, USDA-CSREES, NIOSH, North American Agromedicine Consortium, Canadian Agricultural Safety Association, Washington Growers League, National Farm Medicine Center, and Pennsylvania State University. The “Sheboygan 12” gave us the green light to proceed. Continued planning will engage groups such as the Cattleman’s Association, National Pork Producers, AEM, ADM, Deere and Company, Inc., Western Growers, Cargill, and the Farm Foundation. We believe that participation in a national coalition will benefit many relevant organizations via improved communications, shared perspectives on emerging issues, collective advocacy on behalf of workers’ health and safety, and more globally competitive U.S. agriculture.

We’ve learned valuable lessons from the coalitions developed in Australia and Canada. While some of our U.S. colleagues swear it could never work here (“too complex, not socialized enough, farmers can’t agree among themselves”), we say, “Why not give it a try?” We are frustrated knowing that while talk and research among safety professionals makes good fodder for editorials and hallway conversations, it rarely generates action such as Australia’s mandatory ROPS initiative or Canada’s farm injury surveillance system. There are compelling reasons to catch up with our international neighbors. They’ve forged the path, and they’ve shown us that it’s possible to make quantifiable progress in protecting the well-being of farmers, farm family members, and farm laborers.