Agricultural Leaders' Influence on the Safety Culture of Workers

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ABSTRACT

Most US farmers are small, independent owner-operators, many of whom are exempt from safety regulation and enforcement, as well as age restrictions relative to family members performing hazardous tasks. These smaller farms account for a disproportionate share of the total fatality and injury statistics from farming incidents, contributing to an agriculture-industry death rate that is seven times greater than all occupations combined. In contrast, large agricultural enterprises that employ larger numbers of non-family workers are more regulated and more highly incentivized by economic, supply chain, and societal factors to implement cultures of safety, and are more readily influenced by agricultural opinion leaders, agribusinesses, farm organizations, and agricultural media. These agricultural influencer institutions must find ways to play more significant roles in changing the culture on operations that use only family labor. They will find willing partners in safety organizations such as the Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America (ASHCA), Agricultural Extension, and other health and safety advocates, including the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)-funded agricultural research centers. The overall workplace injury statistics for agriculture remain alarming; however, with leadership from the larger farm operations, and help from ASHCA, academia, the healthcare community, and others, the current culture of workplace safety and health in agriculture can be impacted in positive ways.

Most traditionally dangerous jobs have been increasingly automated and more and more tightly regulated with the resultant increase in safety performance. Meanwhile, agriculture remains a lone bastion with large numbers of independent owner-operators, many of whom are exempt from both safety regulation and enforcement, and age restrictions relative to family members performing hazardous tasks. Thus, agriculture continues to be among our most dangerous occupations with a death rate seven times greater than all occupations combined. Participants in this large segment of US domestic agriculture often have little or no safety training, no safety culture role-models, and have both little incentive and few resources with which to practice on-the-job safety disciplines. In contrast to small agricultural operators, larger enterprises that employ larger numbers of non-family workers are more regulated and more highly incentivized by economic, supply chain, and societal factors to implement cultures of safety, and are more readily influenced by agricultural opinion leaders, agribusinesses, farm organizations, and agricultural media. These same agricultural influencer institutions

must find ways to play more significant roles in changing the culture on those operations that use only family labor, including a huge pool of small- and part-time farms.

Larger farms and agricultural enterprises that have hired, non-family employees, increasingly fall under federal, state, and local worker safety and health regulations and are subject to increasing audit and reporting requirements which motivate good business practices and cultures of safety in the workplace. Even regulations not directly related to work-force safety, such as the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011, have had positive impacts on workplace health and safety by mandating sanitation practices, requiring facilities, and mandating "no non-employees in the workplace" rules which have had the effect of keeping children and other potential bystanders out of harm's way. Additionally, agricultural employers must not only comply with regulations, but their safety performance directly impacts their cost of business in the form of Worker Compensation costs, potential fines or assessments, and potential litigation. These larger

Figure 1. Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America (ASHCA). Established in 2007 as a not-for-profit association of agricultural leaders, the mission of ASHCA is to *proactively address ongoing and emerging occupational safety and health issues affecting U.S. agriculture*. Since its founding, ASHCA has convened annual conferences and a major National Summit in 2013. Charter members include major agricultural entities such as American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, Dairy Farmers of America, Pork Checkoff, National Council of Agricultural Employers, Farm Foundation, CropLife America, and many insurance companies and allied businesses. The NIOSH Agricultural Centers, International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health, and USDA are also among the many members. In addition to ASHCA's safety grants and other program support, its newest endeavor is the AgS HARP™ certificate program to educate and train risk managers of large-scale agricultural operations on best management practices and policies for ensuring safety and health of hired workers. See www.ashca.org for more information on programs and membership.

farms and agricultural businesses are also the suppliers of large retailers, so-called "big-box" stores, and other large food purveyors who do business globally and increasingly require their suppliers to conform with strict ethical codes generally prohibiting child labor, physical or economic mistreatment of workers, overall workplace health and safety cultures, animal welfare, and other sustainability issues as a condition of doing business with them. These large buyers not only audit their producers regularly for compliance, they do not hesitate to debar producers who fail to comply.

In addition to big-box buyers and federal food safety implementation, larger growers that are dependent on exporting their products must also comply with GLOBALG.A.P (http://www.globalgap.org/) and other international or country-specific standards, most of which include broad ethical compliance standards which include on-farm safety, health, and economic equity issues. Because of the need to certify or affirm compliance with such a broad range of official programs requiring health and safety protections for farmers and workers, virtually all large food processors, producers, and marketers require compliance as a condition of doing business with them. Although

this directly impacts the larger growers, those 10% of all U.S. farms that produce 80% or more of the food we eat, they also indirectly impact many of the smaller farms because they may produce products to be harvested by larger growers, or sell inputs such as feed and forage to larger producers who must in turn certify that their inputs were produced ethically and sustainably. Between these formal standards in both the United States and globally, combined with increased consumer demand for supply-chain ethics, all growers are significantly more aware of workplace safety and health issues. They are increasingly receptive to efforts of the Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America (ASHCA) and other groups to help them improve and comply.

Several associations that include large producers are working on their own ethics standards which include age-appropriate restrictions and worker health and safety ethics standards. One of these currently underway is a collaboration between United Fresh Produce Association and the Produce Marketing Association which are drafting an "Ethical Charter for Responsible Labor Practices." Many other key agricultural associations were invited as stakeholders in the drafting process, including

ASHCA, which had opportunity to input important wording suggestions into the process. Bottom line for the larger producers—who according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics produce nearly 80% of the food we eat although they make up only about 10% of the 3.2 million U.S. farms—is that a combination of regulation, economic, and social requirements continues to move them toward cultures of safety and health due to compliance and business sustainability need.

We expect this trend to continue, facilitating the work of safety organizations such as ASHCA, Agricultural Extension, and other health and safety advocates, including the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)-funded agricultural research centers across the United States, and the long-standing National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, Wis., which created voluntary guidelines for children's work in agriculture and recently added a publicly available database of agricultural injury news clippings.

The good news is, these larger farm operations also include the largest percentage of the over 2.5 million individuals, including 1.5 million seasonal, who are estimated to be directly employed in production agriculture in the United States. As a result, cultural changes improving occupational safety and health in these businesses will continue to have the fastest and most direct positive impact on people's lives.

The other 3 million-plus businesses classified as farms in the United States range from smaller employers to very small part-time acreages which may never formally employ a nonfamily worker. These very small, subsistence, part-time, non-traditional, and hobby farms will continue to pose significant challenges to those seeking to improve the overall safety and health cultures in U.S. agriculture, and they continue to contribute a disproportionate share of the total fatality and injury statistics from farming incidents each year. These segments are also the most challenging for media, associations, and other safety and health advocacy groups to reach and influence because of their numbers, diversity, and geographical distribution.

ASHCA and other groups continue to network and discuss how to influence this widely diverse group of smaller producers and will seek innovative ways to convince them to adopt cultures of safety in their everyday work lives. Possible avenues include working directly with associations, educators, and publications that may interact more closely with smaller producers including under-served communities, and with specific training or grant offerings tailored to their needs and accessible to them.

The overall workplace injury statistics for agriculture remain alarming; however, we see progress, and we anticipate significant opportunity to instill those cultures of workplace safety and health that are the only long-term solution to agriculture's safety and health dilemma. ASHCA, with the help of academia, the health-care community, the NIOSH Agricultural Centers, and other groups, looks forward to helping change the current history and culture of workplace safety and health in agriculture in positive ways.

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