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A Case History Introducing the Oregon Ag Seminar Series— Keys to Program and Research-to-Practice Success

Marcy J. Harrington^a and Kirk Lloyd^{b,c}

^aDepartment of Occupational and Environmental Health Sciences, Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

^bRisk Management Resources, Inc, Salem, Oregon, USA

^cSAIF Corporation, Salem, Oregon, USA

Abstract

This case history of Oregon state's Ag Seminar Series is consistent with the Socio-Ecological Model, demonstrating how policy at a state level can influence an organizational approach with impacts that ultimately influence safety practices on the farm. From modest beginnings, the Ag Seminar Series, offered through a workers compensation insurance company, now serves over 2,300 Oregon farmers annually in English and Spanish. This case offers unique but also replicable methods for educators, insurers, and researchers in safety education, safety motivators, and research-to-practice (r2p).

Keywords

Education; insurance; partnership; r2p; safety culture

Introduction

The reasons safety education and new safety measures often take low priority on the farm are multifaceted. We understand from farmers that this low priority is often the unintentional result of farming's daily competing priorities. Other reasons include a lack of risk awareness, lack of support, or a regulatory mandate. This paper introduces a model program and a chain of events that has broken these barriers for farmers and safety professionals in Oregon state, the Ag Seminar Series of the State Accident Insurance Fund (SAIF) Corporation. SAIF Corporation is a not-for-profit, state-chartered workers' compensation company with a long history of serving Oregon's farm community.

With a diverse climate and geology, Oregon is a major contributor to our nation's food supply. Workforce estimates are 58,020 farm operators¹ and 90,289 migrant and seasonal farmworkers.² Cattle and calf production is a top commodity for both beef and milk production. Other leading crops include hay, gains, greenhouse and nursery stock, azaleas,

CONTACT Marcy J. Harrington, marcyw@uw.edu, Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center, University of Washington, Box 357234, Seattle, WA 98195, USA.

Christmas trees, ryegrass, clover, and sugar beet seeds. Oregon also ranks number one nationally for production of several types of berries, hazelnuts, and onions, and it is in the top four states for production of peppermint, cherries, hops, crab, garlic, pears, mink, cranberries, and wine grapes.¹

Using the socio-ecological model, commitment toward safety takes place at every level of influence: policy, institutional, community, interpersonal, and with the grower/farm family. The SAIF Ag Seminar Series is a prime example of this model. This is seen in the growth of the program, retention of membership, and in follow-up consultations that reveal striking evidence of growers taking up safety solutions.

Model institutional structure

“SAIF will be an industry innovator that makes Oregon the safest place to work. We exist to serve and protect the Oregon workforce, meeting the needs of workers and employers and strengthening Oregon’s economy” is the vision statement for SAIF Insurance Corporation, and a good reflection of their Ag Seminar Series.

The Ag Seminar Series began in 1996 after House Bill 3019 Agricultural Employer Inspection Exemptions (sponsored by the Oregon Wheat Growers league) passed, establishing an exemption for small farms (10 or fewer employees) from random inspections under the Oregon-Occupational Safety and Health Act (OR-OSHA). (Farms are not exempt from inspections driven by a complaint or a serious accident.) This exemption is granted with four conditions, one of which is that the farm must attend 4 hours of safety training annually. The workers’ compensation insurance business was competitive, so SAIF offered the 4-hour classes with the intent to improve safety outcomes and distinguish themselves in service to the agricultural marketplace.

Since 1995, thousands of farm owners, managers, and workers have attended SAIF’s agricultural safety seminars, learning how to be safe in one of the most hazardous occupations. Today, these free, half-day seminars are held in 16 cities across the state and are available to anyone, regardless whether or not insured through SAIF Corporation. In 2004, trainings were added entirely in Spanish and now are offered in nine cities. The program has seen steady enrollment growth from their start in 1995 serving a few hundred people to over 2,400 in 2015 (including 678 Spanish participants). Today, the program reaches approximately 90% of insured farms in Oregon.

While the history of the Ag Seminar Series (Figure 1) may be unique to Oregon, the political and safety climate is not much different from other Western populist states. Originally, the program launched as a necessity, but its growth and success built on its positive reputation and grassroots support. An Oregon grass seed grower commented on the Ag Seminars, “Before the seminars, I didn’t know where to start. The printed rules and recommendations just seemed overwhelming, so we really didn’t do much. The seminars break it down, help me know where to start and what to do next, and give me the information I need to make changes at our farm. We approach our work totally differently now.”

This is an example of a state program with a spirit of service and continuous quality improvement. Key lessons from its 20-year history for organization development include:

- Top-down commitment/investment
- Incentives to participate (exemption from random compliance visits from OR-OSHA)
- Content expertise provided by SAIF Corporation internal review board
- Integrated services of insurance, claims management, education, and consultation
- A program informed by needs and requests from policy holders (from evaluation forms)

Ag safety education methods

The qualities of the educator are a known factor for a successful education program—their knowledge, credibility, and charisma. Five trainers work as a team in developing and peer-reviewing the curriculum. Trainers each have backgrounds that foster trust and credibility with a mix of education and direct farming experience—and they ensure their audience knows this by drawing on examples and storytelling in their own personal narrative.

Quality of content and delivery

Each year, the SAIF Ag Seminar team focuses on “doing a few things well.” The Ag Seminars offer only a four to five topic program each year, but with a strong formative development approach and with a newly crafted program every year. The content and delivery requires 9 months of development and is well rehearsed and vetted before the new season. For example, in 2016–2017, the topics are Learning to S.I.T. (a three-step approach to make training more effective.); Clearing the air on pesticide safety; Farm shop safety: improving your odds; Welding safety and other hot topics.

Engagement methods are integrated throughout the session. These include the use of TurningPoint® Audience Response Surveys (audience members can vote with “clickers” and see live results), demos of equipment at breaks, use of adult education methods, breakout discussion groups, and surveys. The last essential feature is the follow-through on the seminars with voluntary consultations and educational resources (website, videos, and handouts.)

Many first-time attendees express something to the effect of “it wasn’t nearly as bad as I expected,” which one may not seem high praise, but it is if you know the audience. As one SAIF educator expressed, “If the grower is heading home to make some changes and attends the seminar again next year, that veiled compliment feels like pretty high praise. And that happens all the time.”

Adoption motivators

SAIF educators rely on three motivating messages for the Ag safety educator's toolbox—*The People, the Money, and the Law*.

The People

A personal human impact story is a powerful motivator. It is memorable and engaging and presents information in a real-life context. Storytelling's value lies in its ability to draw in the learner, persuade him or her of the message, and generate action.³ Recently, the technique has gained acceptance as an effective method for communicating safety information for a variety of agricultural and worker audiences.^{4,5}

The Money

Audiences want to know the costs/benefits associated with recommendations—costs of injury, the cost of the equipment, and implementation time.⁶ SAIF educators provide quick reference sheets with costs and vendors to make a business case and help make the first step to implementation.

The Law

Legal requirements with local enforcement carry weight. There is strong evidence that focused inspection programs with penalties result in decreases in injuries. There is uncertainty at the effectiveness of consultation and awareness programs to prevent injuries over the long term.^{7–10}

When introducing safety solutions, these three strategies are keys to adoption on the farm. During farm consultations in the months after the seminars, growers often show excitement in showcasing their changes. These have included safety measures such as retrofitting a roll-over protection system (ROPS) on an older tractor, building an upgraded chemical storage facility, purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE), and handling techniques. Sometimes, there are very large capital purchases being made, such as replacing traditional all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) with side-by-side farm utility machines. However, most often reported are changes to the culture of safety, comments like “now we know how to talk to each other on our farm” and “now the owners and the employees really work together on improving safety.” People have been willing to change, when they have the resources and motivation.

Partner in research-to-practice

Unique to the Northwest is the Ag Seminar's comprehensive reach, quality of content, and relationship of trust with growers. These are essential qualities in a partner for dissemination of new findings and innovative solutions. SAIF leaders have embraced this role and regularly review new releases and best practices. Here are several examples of their research-to-practice efforts with two NIOSH Agricultural Safety and Health Centers:

Example: Practical solutions for pesticide safety

A SAIF educator saw the Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health (PNASH) Center's Practical Solution for Pesticides Safety guide and called it "As good as gold." SAIF then collaborated with PNASH to develop a program for the season's Ag Seminar Series and supported the printing and distribution of 2,000 copies of the guide. See http://deohs.washington.edu/pnash/practical_solutions.

Example: Universal PTO shield

SAIF saw the great potential of the universal power take-off (PTO) shield that was brought to their attention by a farmer. It is a low-cost and effective option that is being promoted and evaluated by the New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health. See <http://www.nycamh.org/programs/ptoshield>.

SAIF is not only a willing partner but active in outreach to innovators to identify new information and solutions for their clients. Their presentations integrate scientific literature and also introduce their experts/innovators to the audience—adding an additional human element to the story of the research.

Conclusions

SAIF's Ag Seminar Series offers a model for quality safety education through their iterative formative development of the content and program, integration of research and new solutions, and an engaged commitment from stakeholders.

Future program development and replication of their program could be informed through an enhanced evaluation of methods, knowledge gain, up-take of recommended practices, and needs assessments. Yet what we know is that the growth of the program and audience reviews speaks to a highly successful program.

The SAIF Ag team is currently exploring several new directions. One is a tractor ROPS Rebate Program, which would make it the first Western state to launch this program (first developed and organized by the Northeast NIOSH Agricultural Center, NYCAHM). Recently, the program has partnered with Future Farmers of America (FFA) and integrated further youth safety education. For example, in the last year, the seminar promoted ATV safety, producing a personal narrative video with an FFA state officer who lost her nephew to an ATV crash.

This case history of SAIF Corporation's Ag Seminar Series is consistent with the Socio-ecological Model, demonstrating how policy at a state level can influence an organizational approach with impacts that ultimately influence safety practices on the farm. The program offers unique but also replicable methods that foster broad-based engagement and commitment. A tagline on their agricultural website says it all: "Be a leader—Creating an injury-free workplace takes everyone working together in a positive and supportive environment."

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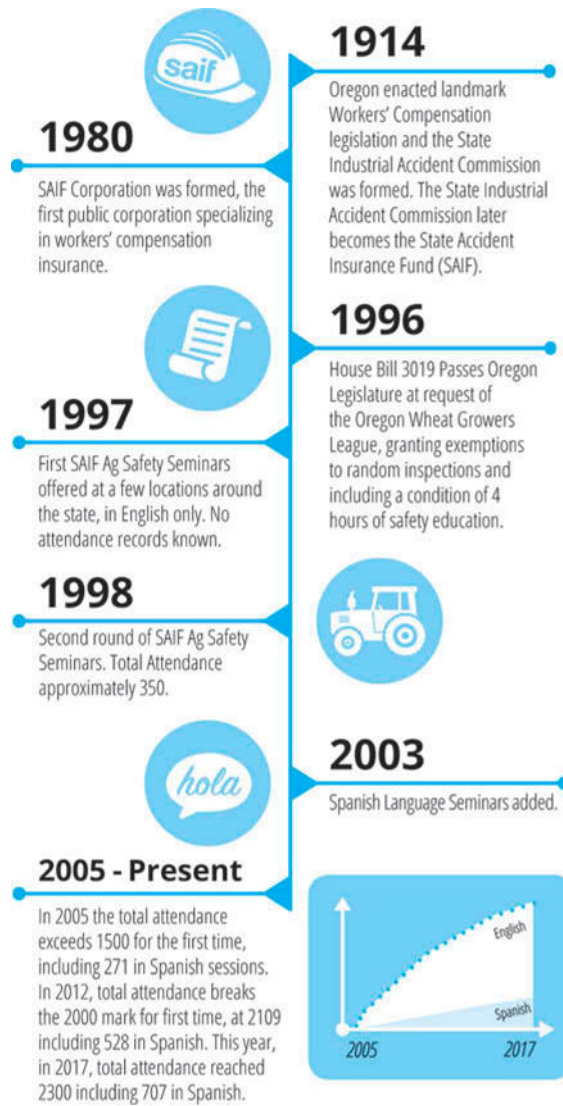


Figure 1. SAIF Corporation Ag Seminar Series timeline.