

AgrAbility Virginia



Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities and Their Families¹

E-News - Summer/Fall 2007

Contents: Arthritis Update: Arthritis Summit; Paper on Farming and Arthritis; Workshop Update: “Serving Farmers: Unique Challenges, Unique Solutions”; Current Clients: A Lifetime of Farming, I & II; Health and Wellness Survey; AgrAbility Concerns...: Disabling Weather

Arthritis Update:



From left to right: Joe Young, AgrAbility Virginia Service Coordinator; Kirk Ballin, AgrAbility Program Coordinator; Bunny Caro-Justin, Virginia Department of Health, Chronic Disease Arthritis Division; Bobby Grisso, AgrAbility Virginia Project Director; Karen Funkenbusch, Missouri AgrAbility Co-Project Director; John Prerumpral, AgrAbility Virginia Research Associate.

On May 11th, **The Virginia Arthritis Action Coalition (VAAC)** hosted its second Annual Arthritis Summit: Living Well With Arthritis-You Can!, at the Marriott West Hotel Innsbrook, in Richmond. The Summit was very well attended, with 129 attendees from a wide-range of professional interests, and many lay persons.

¹ **AgrAbility Virginia** is funded in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Project # 02-01943) and administered by Virginia Tech and Easter Seals Virginia. Virginia Cooperative Extension and Easter Seals Virginia programs and employment are open to all, regardless of race, color, religion, sex, age, veteran status, national origin, disability, or political affiliation. Equal opportunity / affirmative action employers.

Workshops on pharmacology, treatment programs, diet, environmental adaptations/assistive technology, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, pain management, and many other topics were offered. Karen Funkensbusch, Program Director for Missouri AgrAbility, and specialist in rural health issues, facilitated discussions around the concept of Regional Arthritis Centers (RACs) as found in Missouri. The benefits of RACs are that they provide services unique to the needs of the regions. This is of particular interest to AgrAbility and other rural health providers because such a Center would provide the specialized services appropriate to farmers and ranchers. VAAC will be including the development of RACs as part of its long-range plans for addressing the treatment and prevention of arthritis in Virginia.

Also of interest to AgrAbility, and others in rural healthcare, is the publication of a paper, Arthritis and Farming, by Robert “Bobby” Grisso, John Perumpral, and others. This useful paper provides information for farmers and professionals alike in understanding arthritis and its unique relationship with farming. Much of the material will also be of interest to others with or assisting those with Arthritis. The link to the paper is:

http://filebox.vt.edu/users/rgrisso/Papers/Ext/Arthritis_FS.pdf

OT/PT Workshop Update:

The Serving Disabled Farmers and Ranchers: Unique Challenges and Unique Solutions, which was to be planned for Friday, June 22, at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, VA, has been postponed. Please keep an eye out for future flyers and registrations. We will be looking at Fall or Winter dates, in order to better accommodate presenters and attendees.

AgrAbility Virginia Clients – In the News:

Please find below two stories about recent AgrAbility Virginia clients. The first was featured on the National AgrAbility Quarterly Newsletter (Spring 2007, Vol. 7, No. 3).

1 - A Lifetime of Farming Leaves its Mark

Like any loving daughter, Don Padgett’s daughter Genny looks out for her father’s health and safety. In fact, Genny immediately thought of her father when she met Joe Young, a service coordinator for the Virginia AgrAbility Project, in the Greenville/Emporium cooperative extension office where she worked. Genny talked to Joe about her father’s chronic knee problems and how it was affecting his ability to work on the farm. Genny asked Joe to contact Don to see how AgrAbility could get involved. However, like any proud and independent farmer, Don’s response to Joe’s phone call was, “Well, I get along ok... I’d really rather the money go to someone

who needs it much more than I do; the person who is the worst off is the one who should be given these opportunities.”

Continuing the Tradition

Sixty-two year old Don Padgett and his wife Mary have been raising beef cattle and farming their 300 acres of corn, wheat, soybeans, cotton, and peanuts since 1968. The beautiful white farmhouse where they raised their son, Jay, and daughter, Genny, has been in the family for a hundred years. The original home's deed is carefully preserved in a glass display case in their home. In addition to the land he owns, Don leases and farms an additional 1,500 acres in surrounding counties. Don's son, Jay, has his own farming operation and the two help each other, managing more than 3,000 acres. However, on any given day they may be separated by over thirteen miles due to the distance between their fragmented farmland.



Don Padgett and his son Jay on the family farm

A Lifetime of Farming Takes its Toll

The congenital condition *genu varum*, commonly known as bowlegs¹, coupled with farm work has left little cartilage remaining in Don's knees. Years of mounting and dismounting tractors, climbing ladders, and performing other farming operations have clearly accelerated the deterioration of his knees. Most people who are born bowlegged eventually grow out of it, but Don has been dealing with knee problems for most of his life.

He has had surgeries on his knees as well as cortisone injections, yet nothing has resolved the pain and weakness he manages on a daily basis.

Recently, surgeons have recommended replacing Don's knees, along with breaking and resetting the fibula and tibia in both of his legs in an attempt to align them and reduce future strain on the joints. They suggest he undergo this surgery in his mid-sixties to reduce the likelihood that he will have to repeat the procedure more than once. Although a daunting prospect, Don has been receptive to the idea. In the meantime, Don has difficulty climbing the narrow ladders of his five grain bins during harvest season, mounting and dismounting his tractors and trucks, walking long distances, and standing for long periods of time. A lower spinal fusion several years ago has left some numbness in his left leg, which occasionally “gives out” on him. He has also developed arthritis that causes pain in his back, shoulders, hips, and elbows. Perhaps more worrisome than the pain is the risk of getting injured when he works alone and can not call upon his son for help.

Working With AgrAbility

Kirk Ballin, program coordinator for the Virginia AgrAbility Project, and Joe Young, AgrAbility service coordinator, visited Don in early February 2006 to conduct a farm assessment. During the assessment process, they noticed Don's limitations climbing onto and off his trailers to check the level of grain before hauling it to market. Limitations were caused by increased pain, reduced range of motion, and general weakness. Don could not uncover the truck's bed to load and unload grain because it was difficult to climb onto the truck and manually position the heavy canvas cover without the help of a roller crank. The weakness in Don's legs and knees not only made moving around the farm difficult, but also set up the potential for secondary injuries caused by slips and falls around machinery. Working with livestock also posed a problem because of general weakness and reduced range of motion. Kirk and Joe discussed Don's challenges and identified the following recommendations that may make day-to-day work tasks more manageable:

- Install spiral staircases and spring-type hatch tops on the five-grain bins to make checking the grain level and condition of the grain easier and safer.
- Add/Modify steps on the tractors and combines to make mounting and dismounting safer and easier.
- Install cattle sweepers for isolating cattle when giving vaccinations, calving, and other cattle handling activities.
- Install a roller canvas on his grain trailers for ease of loading and unloading grain.
- Obtain a utility vehicle for ease of traveling around the farm.
- Obtain knee and leg supports to stabilize and support the soft tissue, tendons, and ligaments of the legs and knee joints, thereby helping to relieve pressure on both.
- Install a mirror above the top edge of the grain trailers so that the level and condition of the grain could be checked from the ground without having to climb onto the trailer.

Next, Kirk, Joe, and Don's family prioritized the recommendations. Since the farms' major source of revenue is derived from grain crops, the group decided that the first modifications should focus on improving Don's ability to independently and safely perform essential tasks related to crop production. A Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) team made up of Tom Rybak, a rehabilitation engineer, John Allen, an occupational therapist, and Dolores Heisler, an intake counselor, worked with Don and Virginia AgrAbility on these tasks. Funding from the DRS provided spiral staircases for the three main grain bins and spring type grain bin hatch tops for all five-grain bins. The grain bin stairs are now wider and slip-resistant, making it easier and safer for Don to access the top of the bin, and the spring type hatches are much easier to open. In addition, new roller canvases were ordered for two of his three-grain trailers and paid for by DRS. The roller covers are made of heavy duty canvas

and feature self-locking mechanisms and long cranking arms that allow Don to roll the canvas covers safely and comfortably from the ground. In addition, Virginia AgrAbility referred Don to the Virginia Assistive Technology Loan Fund as a way to finance the purchase of a utility vehicle and modified tractor steps.



Grain bins showing stairway installation in progress

A Productive Farm and a Happy Farmer

On March 12, 2007, Don walked up his newly installed spiral stairways for the very first time. As he reached the top of his grain bin, he looked down at AgrAbility staff below him and said with a smile, “I may not be able to zoom up it like you, but I’ll be able to get up these stairs just fine.”

Although Don Padgett still contends that there are farmers worse off than him, he would be happy to stand in a roomful of farmers at any association meeting and tell them that it’s the little things that count. He appreciates what AgrAbility has done for him, and extends an open invitation to any farmer who wants to visit his farm to check out the steps on the grain bin or his new roller canvas truck covers, and discuss how modifications like these may allow them to work more safely, effectively, and with less pain. Like all farmers, Don is a proud man. He cares deeply about his farming lifestyle, his family, his business, and his fellow farmers. He understands firsthand the importance of carrying on that rich tradition. AgrAbility has helped Don make carrying on that tradition a little bit easier.



AgrAbility’s Joe Young with Don at the top of the Grain Bin Stairs

2 - A Lifetime of Farming Leaves Its Mark In Other Ways

Blanche Smith knew nothing but farming her whole life. But with the death of her husband and her children choosing other vocations and the eventual loss of her legs due to diabetes, Blanche had to leave the farming life. She became a resident of the Pulaski Health and Rehabilitation Center. However, her passion for her agricultural way of life did not leave her. She still wanted to get into the dirt and make things grow. Doing gardening in her new setting, however, was difficult and potentially unsafe. The Center rightly so had to be concerned about her safety and about liability issues.

AgrAbility Virginia was contacted by Karen Frazier at Blue Ridge Independent Living Center, New River Valley to see if we could assist Blanche and the Center in providing a safe and rewarding opportunity for Blanche to engage in her passion to garden.

In consultation with Jane Walsh at Woodrow Wilson Rehab Center and in partnership with the Master Gardeners Program of the New River Valley (volunteer Nydia Meredith) AgrAbility was able to construct and adapt 2 styles of raised beds that allowed Blanche to plant and cultivate her flowers without having to leave her wheelchair. AgrAbility also provided her with an adaptive tool that allowed her easy access to her plants, while Nydia arranged donations of soil, and preparation assistance from the local Pulaski High School horticulture class. Other top soil was donated by Waynesboro Nurseries in Augusta County. The much-appreciated results are shown below.



Blanche Smith, a Center nurse, and Nydia Meredith in between the 2 sets of raised beds



Steve Bridge with AgrAbility and Nydia Meredith After the completion of the first set of raised beds.

**TAKEN FROM THE PRESENTATION TO THE ASABE CONVENTION
IN MINNEAPOLIS, MN, JUNE 17-20, 2007
“Virginia Agricultural Safety and Health Survey”**

Abstract: Injuries and occupational illnesses are far more common among farmers and farm workers than in other occupations. The need to reduce the risk associated with agricultural operations is obvious. Past studies focusing on acute or traumatic injuries associated with agricultural work have provided valuable information to planners and educators. The primary objective of this study was to determine the effect of exposure to agricultural hazards on traumatic injuries, chronic illness and the general health outcomes of farmers in Virginia. A sample size of 1650 was selected to reduce potential sampling errors, and over 300 farmers returned a completed survey. Results of the analysis showed that 1.5% of the respondents had at least one injury requiring medical attention or missing work for a half day or longer during the 12 months preceding the survey. Falls, heavy lifting, farm machinery repairs, and power tools were found to be the major causes of injuries. Rates of chronic health problems among the respondents were comparable with non-agricultural populations and did not appear to be influenced by exposure to common agricultural hazards.

CONCLUSIONS: This study found a strong negative correlation between age and agricultural injuries. This finding is most likely because older farmers have significantly lower rates of exposure to agricultural hazards than younger farmers. Clearly, injury prevention programs should focus on the agricultural workers in the younger age groups. The results also indicated that 18% of farmers in Virginia are planning to retire in the next five years. As these older farmers retire and are replaced by less experienced workers, new safety programs are essential to meet the needs of these new workers.

More farmers spend more time handling livestock, operating farm tractors, trucks or autos, working on wet slippery surfaces and working in dusty conditions. For this reason, it is not surprising that the leading causes of agricultural injuries were livestock, falls, agricultural machinery and heavy lifting/overexertion. The rates of these injuries were relatively stable from 1994 to 2006 indicating these hazards are still a serious problem for farm workers. Safety programs in Virginia should emphasize livestock safety, fall prevention, safe repair and maintenance procedures, agricultural machinery safety, and the prevention of lifting injuries.

The general health and age adjusted illness rates among the respondents were consistent with the national averages. Risk factors such as alcohol and tobacco use among these respondents also appear to mirror national rates. However, the age adjusted body mass index of the respondents was found to be higher than that of the general population. Almost one third of the respondents were clinically obese, which has a well-established association with poor health outcomes. Given the strong body of evidence in the literature, providing information on healthy diets and exercise would be appropriate and advisable when addressing agricultural safety and health audiences in Virginia.”

Full Paper: <http://filebox.vt.edu/users/rgrisso/Papers/075109.pdf>

AgrAbility Concerns.... Disabling Weather



I have commented several times that when a farmer talks about the weather he/she isn't just passing the time with small talk. Although the weather affects all of our lives, for most of us it is nothing in comparison to the impact the weather has on the daily life of a farmer. A couple of rainy days on a freshly mowed hayfield can ruin a hay crop. A stretch of hot, dry windy weather at the wrong time can determine whether a crop yields its expected quantity or not. And all of the above can determine the quality and quantity

of meat, milk, etc. that livestock will produce. The weather can be a farmer's greatest assistant, as well as a farmer's greatest source of disability.

This summer has seen farmers throughout the U.S. struggling against extreme forces and consequences of the weather, the disabling forces of floods, fire, drought, wind, and increasing pestilence. The disabling consequences of these natural forces are compounded by global climate changes, encroaching development, and shifting economics.

AgrAbility is concerned about the effort of disabled farmers to keep on farming – with effectiveness and safety. Usually this applies to specific conditions of the individual farmer. However, we wish to acknowledge the disability that all farmers can face when the weather isn't their partner but a severely disabling force to be reckoned with. Our hearts and support go out to all the farmers who are seriously being challenge by the forces of the extreme weather this summer.

Thanks, Kirk Ballin
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