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K-State Heads Project to Help Disabled Farmers

MANHATTAN, Kan. – It's a day that changed Gene Delaney's life forever.

"August 27, 1995," says the 62-year-old Ness City, Kan. farmer, recalling the day he was driving a tractor and hauling an 1,100-pound, round bale when it fell from the raised scoop, crushing his body.

Delaney survived the accident, which broke his back and severely damaged his spinal cord, though he's now paralyzed from the waist down. But with the help of assistive farm technology, he's also still farming.

Delaney's story gave added push to an effort at Kansas State University that will provide information and on-farm assistance – including equipment – to disabled farmers.

University officials announced that they have received a grant for \$590,982 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to initiate the Kansas AgrAbility Program, to help farmers, their families and farm workers with disabilities.

Currently in Kansas, it's estimated that there are more than 9,000 full-time or part-time farmers or farm workers with disabilities, which not only include trauma injuries such as Delaney's, but also such debilitating conditions as arthritis, asthma, or the after-effects of a stroke. A recent study estimates more than 27,000 non-fatal injuries occur on Kansas farms each year, among those age 16 and older. Of those, 64 percent (more than 16,000) are considered severe, and 1 percent (270) will be permanent.

"This program will enable us to provide information, resources and a variety of services to Kansans who have become disabled while engaged in production agriculture," said K-State Research and Extension agricultural engineer John Slocombe, the project director who wrote the grant proposal for the university.

The U.S. Congress authorized the AgrAbility project in the 1990 Farm Bill, and the first state program was launched in 1991. Twenty-two states either have had or currently have an AgrAbility program, including Kansas' neighbors Nebraska, Missouri, Iowa, Texas, Colorado and Oklahoma.

"Probably the most important thing this program does is it helps in the speedy transaction of all services" that a disabled farmer may need, said Julia Beems, the project coordinator for the Kansas AgrAbility program. She likened the program to a one-stop shop where the farmer can request assistance and get information regarding – and help paying for – equipment or modifications.

"Farmers want to stay on the farm," Beems added, "but [initially] they don't know how to make that happen. Instead of reinventing the wheel – figuring out how to get assistance – we can coordinate services so that they're up and working again in a relatively short time."

Delaney agrees that's important for farmers. For example, after his accident, it took nearly two years for him to acquire a tractor lift.

"Before that, it was crawl, dig and scratch for me to get up into my tractor and run it," said Delaney, whose on-farm improvements and assistance include a wheelchair, an all-terrain vehicle with four-wheel drive, concrete sidewalks to a work shop, hand controls on equipment and a bale processor for the tractor.

"When [the accident] first happened," Delaney said, "I thought I was done farming. But there's a lot I can do because of assistive technology."

Delaney currently feeds 35 stocker cows and grows corn, milo and wheat on 1,150 acres – "about the same" as he was doing in 1995 before his accident, he said.

Kansas' AgrAbility project will take advantage of many state services previously offered – including rehabilitation facilities, hospitals, mental health agencies, Extension offices and more – but Beems said the program's biggest advantage may be that it involves people already working in agriculture who understand the unique needs of farmers.

"We understand the agricultural industries because that's what we focus on," she said. "We know the job requirements and the tasks needed to farm."

Slocombe called the grant "a tremendous award for Kansas agriculture producers that has been a long time coming." K-State Research and Extension personnel had submitted proposals for this project since 1992 before finally receiving funding this year.

"The funds are extremely competitive as only 22 states currently have funded projects," he said. "Kansans will be hearing a lot more about the program's activities and resources available as we get this four-year program underway."

USDA awards the grants only through a land-grant university in cooperation with a non-profit public agency. Slocombe said the project is a team effort between three groups: K-State Research and Extension; Southeast Kansas Independent Living; and Assistive Technology for Kansans. The latter two are located in Parsons. The actual award is \$147,753 per year for four years.

Other agencies with key supporting roles include the Centers for Independent Living, Rural Independent Living, Easter Seals, Vocational Rehabilitation and the Kansas Livestock Association.

The program "brings everyone together so we can support the individual [farmer] in a better way," said Sara Sack, co-director of Kansas AgrAbility, who works with the University of Kansas Center on Disability in Parsons. "We understand assistive technology and we understand funding for assistive technology. And, K-State clearly knows farm safety. This cooperation will help people return to ag-related employment much sooner."

Beems said farmers can request assistance even without a medically-diagnosed disability. "We don't need a doctor's order to help," she said. "If somebody calls us and they can't turn the door knob because of their arthritis, we can help them. Some may need just simple modifications on their farm; others may require major improvements to facilities and equipment."

The Kansas AgrAbility project is available to all farmers through the Assistive Technology for Kansans' toll-free number: 1-800-KAN DO IT (1-800-526-3648). Phone calls are routed to one of five regional sites in Kansas.

Farm Injuries In Kansas

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment lists agriculture as the most hazardous industry in the state. According to the Agricultural Safety and Health Program at Kansas State University, 22 Kansans were killed in agriculture-related accidents in 1999 (the most recent year for state statistics).

The following estimates on farm injuries are based on national statistics, and were used to support Kansas' successful grant proposal for a statewide AgrAbility program

* Kansas has 8,123 non-fatal farm-related injuries per year for persons less than 20 years of age. This indicates that about 23 youth are injured on Kansas farms every day.

* According to a report funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Kansas has an average of 27,788 non-fatal farm injuries per year for farm workers age 16 and over

* The National Safety Council, summarizing data from 21 states, found that 64 percent of all farm workers' injuries are considered severe, and approximately 1 percent will be permanent (requiring significant changes in how that person works

* Of the more than 17,000 Kansas farmers over 65 years of age, about 17 percent (or 3,000) are affected by mobility or a self-care disability, such as arthritis or other condition associated with aging

* Among full-time and part-time farmers and farm workers, approximately 9,054 farmers with disabilities are working on Kansas farms

* From July 1993 to April 2000, the Kansas Livestock Association reported that 1,563 accidents occurred in the feed yards of their members. The total cost of all accidents during that period was more than \$5.3 million.

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K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the well-being of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county Extension offices, experiment fields, area Extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus, Manhattan.

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