Column: It’s National Agricultural Safety Awareness Program (ASAP) Week

Giving safety the same attention as any other key aspect of the business is essential to the success of any ag operation.

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Published on March 5, 2018 6:23AM
Last changed on March 6, 2018 4:30PM

When was the last time you seriously thought about safety on your farm or ranch?

With distractions like planting schedules, commodity prices and weather issues, it’s not overly surprising to hear a farmer or rancher admit that safety has taken a back seat in the day-to-day activity of raising crops and animals.

But this is National Agricultural Safety Awareness Program (ASAP) Week, March 4-10. The Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) Health & Safety Committee wants to remind all farmers and ranchers that safety must play an important role in your business.

Not prioritizing safety puts not only yourself at serious risk, but also your employees, family members and anyone else who visits your operation.

The numbers speak for themselves. Year after year, research shows that farming is one of the most dangerous occupations in America. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2015, fatalities among American agricultural workers rose to 180, an increase of 22 percent from the 148 cases reported in 2014.

Farmworkers and laborers involved in crop, nursery and greenhouse operations recorded 106 fatalities, an increase of 33 percent from 2014. This matched the highest total ever reported (in 2010) for that group.

On Oregon farms, falls and slips were the most common cause of accepted worker’s compensation claims for nonfatal injuries in 2016 — the most current year for available data — followed by injuries from being struck by or against an object, and overexertion, according to Oregon Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA).
Six workers died on Oregon farms in 2016, while there were five other workers whose nonfatal injuries required treatment for at least one night in a hospital.

These statistics are sobering. But a few simple steps can prevent you, or one of your employees or loved ones, from becoming one of these numbers.

A good first step is to simply recognize that a safety program is essential for any ag business to become or remain successful.

A good second step is to schedule a safety meeting, or a tailgate meeting, or a safety huddle. Whatever you call it, what matters is that time is taken out of the workday to review and/or remind employees about the potential hazards involved in what they do on the job.

Before an employee starts a new task, managers should organize a safety meeting or, as Oregon OSHA calls it, a Job Hazard Analysis. The goal is to identify potential hazards associated with the job at hand and to review what employees can do to adequately protect themselves.

These two simple actions will get your farm or ranch on the right track.

At oregonfb.org, the OFB Health & Safety Committee offers many resources to help ag producers who are just getting started with a safety program, as well as those who already have one in place.

For example, a very useful resource is “Sowing the Seeds to a Safe Agricultural Workplace.” This is a 59-page guide that distills the rules Oregon OSHA has in place for agriculture — so you don’t have to do the research yourself.

The guide offers how-tos, checklists, and safety practices to make sure your farm or ranch is OSHA compliant and, more importantly, is doing what it can to prevent accidents, injuries, and deaths.

The many topics covered in “Sowing the Seeds to a Safe Agricultural Workplace” include safety committees, forklifts, ladders, material handling, noise, pesticides and rollover protective structures.

The OFB Health & Safety Committee also offers information about the Worker Protection Standard and effective hazard communication, along with the popular OFB Rural Road Safety Brochure and many links to other helpful websites.

Visit oregonfb.org and explore the health and safety materials available. These tools were curated by Farm Bureau members to help lay the foundation for an effective safety and health program, or fine-tune an existing program.

Giving safety the same attention as any other key aspect of the business is essential to the success of any ag operation. And there’s no better time to focus on it than during National Agricultural Safety Awareness Program Week.

The OFB Health & Safety Committee is committed to giving farmers and ranchers the information they need to get this important job done right.

*Cory Stengel is chairman of the Oregon Farm Bureau Health & Safety Committee.*