Farm Safety
By Ruth Faivre, Managing Editor

Farmworkers are at high risk for work-related lung diseases, heat illness, confined space hazards, noise-induced hearing loss, fall hazards and much more. Like many other employers, farmers think accidents will never happen to them or their employees, but they do on a daily basis.

In fact, in 2014, key preliminary findings of the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014 National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries establish that the number of fatal work injuries in agriculture was up 14 percent.

Nevertheless, like any other industry, education, awareness and preventive action can significantly reduce these dangers along with proper equipment, training and commonsense precautions.

Over 2 million people work in our nation’s Ag industry as their herculean efforts help feed America and the world. Farm work is extremely important, but it is also one of the most dangerous industries in the country.

A number of occupational hazards exist for farmers, their employees and their families involving machinery, biologic and chemical dangers as well as social and environmental stresses.

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Tractors account for more than half of all farm fatalities and tractor overturns/rollovers account for the bulk of those tractor-related deaths. That is why it is so important to have a rollover protective structure (ROPS) but more than half the tractors in Wisconsin do not.

The National Farm Medicine Center’s Wisconsin ROPS Rebate Program reimburses tractor owners up to 70 percent (maximum of $865) toward the total cost of retrofitting. To apply, phone 1-877-767-7748 (1-877-ROPSR4U), or visit www.ropsr4u.com.

Other tractor-related dangers stem from a lack of training, unsafe equipment, carbon monoxide exposure and moving parts that can entangle clothing and hair. Employers and supervisors can help ensure the equipment is safe with regular inspections and installation of safety features like seatbelts and flashing lights as well as training workers on safety procedures, rules of the road, appropriate field practices and equipment use and maintenance.

Additionally, with approximately 50% of all farmworkers being Hispanic, it is imperative for employers to provide training for farm employees in a language and vocabulary they understand.

Ensuring agricultural workers’ safety not only helps these workers stay safe in an often physically challenging work environment; it also helps employers remain economically competitive.

Educational programs are available for farm safety education through many sources such as governmental (federal and state) entities such as OSHA, USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and Agricultural Research Service (ARS); state colleges and universities; Ag associations, your local utility companies, farm suppliers, consultants and more.

However, one of the best resources I have seen in a long time is a four-part series entitled “Tragic Harvest,” www.startribune.com/deadliest-workplace-the-family-farm/330403811, by Jeffrey Meitrodt, with photos/videos by Renée Jones Schneider, both of the MN Star Tribune. (If you are not computer savvy, kindly ask a friend to print it out for you to read.)

While this series focuses on Minnesota, it is applicable to any state. It is very vocal and may make you uncomfortable as you recognize actions that you need to change or realities you need to face but a wake-up call is good for all of us from time-to-time. I highly recommend you read the entire series and view the videos.

This series, based on real-life incidents, will drive home the necessity for safe practices and demonstrate how even a moment of safety lapses can quickly become a moment that forever haunts you.