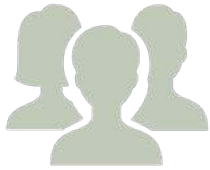# Facilitating Return to Work for Injured and Ill Animal Agriculture Workers

PROJECT PERSONNEL

- **Bryan Weichelt, PhD, MBA - Project Scientist**
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- **Shaun Halstead - Database Administrator**
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SUMMARY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES:

√ **An interactive software application designed for clinicians to guide return to work planning for injured workers in animal agriculture. The application offers multiple tools, including:**
- a database of dairy and swine job profiles
- an interface for clinicians to input a functional job analysis and receive an output of customized worksheets and relevant light-duty job activities (available in both English and Spanish) to support employee return-to-work
- a database of photos displaying over 1,000 farm tasks to aid physicians in understanding and communicating about agricultural tasks

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Agriculture is a dangerous industry. The Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, and trapping industries account for nearly 30% of the economic cost of workplace injuries. While this number is high, it is likely an underreported figure. Within this group of agricultural industries, handling livestock is the most significant contributor to workplace injuries.

There is a clear need for practical workplace safety training to prevent injuries among livestock workers. Further, primary care physicians and insurers must be equipped with information and strategies to support workers recovering and returning to work.

The project's goals included:

1. Develop a compendium of dairy and pork tasks that encompass the various types of livestock production, size of the operation, and other variables that alter the ergonomics of each task.
2. Develop and conceptually test preliminary models for dairy and pork light-duty work options for five common injury/illness groups in each industry with key informants from healthcare and agricultural industries.
3. Conduct preliminary testing of the light-duty job activities (LDJA) for agricultural workers developed by physicians, Physical Therapists, and Occupational Therapists with 10-20 farmers and workers from dairy and pork operations and determine the feasibility of these modified activities for farmers/farm owners.
4. Develop a prototype return to work computer program with an interactive user interface to produce LDJA for injured workers and their employers.

IN CONCLUSION...

After the project team developed a comprehensive list of dairy and swine work activities, they developed models for light-duty work options for common injuries and illnesses. Then, they translated the models into an interactive, web-based software prototype, including a database of job profiles, a clinician interface, and an interactive input form. The software prototype translates clinician inputs into customized return-to-work sheets for farm owners and employees in English and Spanish.

Ultimately, the project characterized the duties and responsibilities of agricultural workers and created applicable return to work strategies, including LDJA, for farmers and farmworkers by physicians and other providers.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR AGRICULTURAL HEALTH AND SAFETY?

New farmers or employees entering the agricultural workforce may have no prior experience working with livestock. Training may not thoroughly cover workplace safety, and needs to be linguistically and culturally appropriate for the workers. These barriers can increase the risk of occupational injuries while working with livestock.

If an employee is injured, primary care physicians play an essential role in treating and rehabilitating these workers. Unfortunately, many physicians don't have experience or a background in the livestock industry. **When insurance companies call on physicians to fill out workers' compensation paperwork and inform workers about work restrictions,** they have limited knowledge to base recommendations. In addition, they may be uncomfortable assigning light-duty job activities (LDJA).

Just like physicians, many insurers have a limited background in agriculture. This can lead to disagreements about recommendations from physicians and refusal to provide coverage or benefits as prescribed. Because of these factors, many employers decide it's just better for an employee to stay home until they are fully recovered - leading to additional lost wages for employees and increased workers' compensation expenses to employers.

WHAT'S NEXT? WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS OR RECOMMENDATIONS?

The **interactive software can help physicians, farmers, and insurers understand and facilitate return-to-work** by accurately assessing worker injuries and work environments and providing tangible recommendations. The tool can also **decrease communication barriers and promote understanding between farmers, employees, and physicians** across English and Spanish languages.

LEARN MORE AT:
www.SafeReturnToWork.org

Updated March 2022