



Aging on the Farm

UMASH Virtual Community Forum Series Summary

To raise awareness of aging in the agricultural sector and its health and safety implications, as well as identify opportunities and resources to support aging farmers, farm families, and farm communities.

Community Forum 1: June 15, 2020 (Focusing on Wisconsin & Minnesota)

Presentation Highlights

Challenges & Opportunities of Aging in Rural Communities, Dr. Joseph E., Gaugler

Aging in rural areas of the United States involves:

- Physician shortages
- Economic challenges
- Caregiving responsibilities for children & grandchildren
- Fewer caregivers for elderly
- Difficulty building community partnerships
- Geographic distance

Solutions require investing in rural communities broadly, through infrastructure like broadband and more robust health systems.

Aging Safely and Productively: What you need to know, Dr. Lisa F. Schiller

Farmers stay working for longer than those in other professions. The risk for fatal injury increases for farmers starting at age 55. Tractor-related injuries and falls are the main risk factors. Common concerns like osteoarthritis, hearing loss, and depression all add to the risk. To decrease risk of fatal and non-fatal injuries, the following can help:

- Prevention efforts early in life
- Regular health care & screening
- Good nutrition & exercise
- Good lighting and handrails in work and walking areas
- Moderating alcohol
- Social connection
- Installing ROPS (rollover protection structure) & seatbelts
- Sufficient rest

Act your Age: Resistance Training for Healthy Aging, Dr. Nicholas M. Beltz:

Aging leads to declines in cardiovascular, respiratory, metabolic, muscle, bone, and stress response functioning. Resistance training, or focusing on muscle strength, can facilitate healthy aging by increasing muscular fitness, mobility, independence, lean body mass, bone mass, and lowering the chance of falls.

Farmer Perspective: Aging on the Farm, Randy Koller:

Randy, a dairy producer in Wisconsin, does 90% of the duties on his farm. This leaves little room for reduced productivity due to injury, illness, or burnout. Utilizing technology (cell phones, GPS guidance, and more) and asking for help are helpful strategies to make it easier to work sustainably. Farmers may take a “tough person” approach, but healthcare, screening, testing, and support are important to maintaining wellbeing.

Discussion Highlights

Challenges that affect the health and safety of aging farmers:

- **Limited support:** Managing a farm is hard work and it can be difficult to find adequate support and/or successfully transition responsibilities to a younger generation. Aging farmers may experience changes in physical and cognitive capacity while facing myriad difficult decisions (e.g. if/when to sell the farm) and financial hardships. Some aging farmers may be reluctant to use new technologies that could aid in farming safely for longer. Further, farm families often need support for both the aging farmer and those taking on caregiving responsibilities in addition to farm labor.
- **Inadequate access to healthcare and services:** Many aging farmers have inadequate health insurance coverage and access to healthcare and other support services, including responsive emergency services, transportation, and caregiving. Unreliable/unavailable broadband internet services or a reluctance to use new technologies such as telehealth create additional barriers.
- **Stress and mental health challenges:** Many aging farmers face increased stress and difficulty managing their mental health. These challenges are often exacerbated by isolation and a lack of social support, financial hardships, feeling undervalued or no longer useful, and a reluctance to embrace change or accept help from others.

Areas for improvement in supporting aging farmers:

- **Awareness & advocacy:** More awareness is required regarding the impact of aging on health and safety of older workers (e.g., higher fatality and injury rates). More advocacy is needed for farmer mental health and stress.
- **Health care:** Healthcare providers that serve farming populations could improve their knowledge of the unique health and safety concerns of this group and make their messaging and services more accessible to them. This could be improved by giving healthcare students more direct experience working with rural populations. Health staffing is limited, and there are often limited resources to adequately compensate them in rural areas.
- **Access:** Farmers may feel pushed to move to a more populated area to access healthcare and other services. There may be a need to “go where the farmers are” rather than having them travel to receive services. As mentioned previously, aging farmers and those working to support them often experience issues with technology access and use (including broadband and smart phones).
- **Understanding this population:** Finally, there is a need for those working with aging farmers to understand the distinct differences within the broad population (i.e. 85 yr. olds may have a focus on family vs. 65 yr. olds may be focused on being young and active). Because farming is physically challenging, farmers may not choose to participate in healthy leisure activities like ‘sport’. There is a need for more input from farmers themselves.

Opportunities to better support aging farmers and farm communities:

- Community preventative health programs (e.g. group fitness classes) support health & wellbeing.
- Faith-based organizations could help increase awareness of health and safety resources.
- Rural healthcare offices may be able to partner with experts to make telehealth more accessible.
- Home visits are a powerful tool for education and support for farmers.

Community Forum 2: June 30, 2020 (Focusing on N. Dakota & Minnesota)

Presentation Highlights

Reasons for Continuing to Farm and Meeting Health Needs in Later Years | Florence Becot, PhD

High health & safety risks, and lack of access to services in rural areas, and complex farm transitions call for extra support for aging agricultural populations. Exiting farming or farm transitioning requires planning over the course of one's life and even across generations. On a personal level, aging and exiting farming can mean a loss of identity for those who associate with the strong work ethic, pride, and resilience of farm work. One of the biggest determinants of what farmers do in their later years is whether or not there is a next generation to take over. Economic, and political factors also make it difficult to maintain stability and plan for the future. To support aging farmers, we need to understand what each farmer needs and wants and focus on supporting farmers across the lifespan. Efforts should also focus on community-level interventions (e.g. reducing economic instability, increasing access to healthcare and broadband internet).

Aging in Place: Challenges and Opportunities for Farmers | Jane Strommen, PhD

Aging well, depending on the farmer and circumstance, may involve maintaining good health, preventing disease, and even remaining engaged in farming for longer. It is important to hold both positive and negative experiences of aging in balance by recognizing losses, taking time to mourn them, and then moving on and appreciating the positive aspects of growing older. Aging in place (growing old on the farm) can be complicated by isolation, a lack of local services and transportation options, inadequate home or community design, and challenges planning for the future amid heavy workloads and so much uncertainty. One solution is to adapt the environment (e.g. adopting universal design principles in the home and workplace) to allow aging individuals to continue living and working independently.. Finally, farm families should start having conversations early on about finances, living arrangements, medical care, end of life, and family legacy planning.

Aging & Agriculture: Health, Hazards, and Issues of North American Elderly Farmers | Carla Wilhite, ODT

Farmers over 54 years old are at higher risk for farm fatality and non-fatal permanent injuries. People are healthy when they're doing the things they want to do. Assistive technology (like lifts to enter tractors), environmental modifications (like lighting, flooring, and handles), and other aging in place strategies are important to implement before they are needed. Positive aging involves adequate transition planning, long term care, and end of life decision-making.

Farmer Perspective: Aging on the Farm | Dan Younggren, Fourth Generation Sugar Beet Farmer

Transition planning can take 10 to 15 years, and it can be difficult to let go and let others take charge. A retiring farmer does not just stop, because it is impossible to just stop what you love to do. In agriculture, there is incredible pressure, including financial struggles, policy and law restrictions, and, now, a pandemic. There is progress being made to improve farmer mental health, but it is still important to open up and ask for help from friends, faith communities, help lines, and more.

Discussion Highlights

Challenges that affect the health and safety of aging farmers:

- **Uncertainty and mental health challenges:** Agriculture is a hazardous and uncertain profession. Pre-planning is essential to aging “well”; however, this is difficult to do while managing constant change. Due to financial hardship, isolation, the demands of the work, mental health issues and high suicide rates are devastatingly common in agricultural communities.
- **Inadequate access to services:** Many aging farmers have difficulties accessing affordable healthcare and other support services, especially when there exists great distance to care and broadband internet may be costly or unavailable. While accessible telehealth during COVID-19 may provide improved access to some degree, health insurance restrictions and distance from care can prevent aging farmers from getting the care they need.
- **Physical barriers:** Aging farmers may experience more injuries as their physical capabilities and reaction times change. Additionally, older homes are often not well adapted to the needs of an aging person. Further, women in agriculture may experience higher strain and injury when using equipment, which is often not scaled for women’s bodies.
- **Transitioning the farm:** Retiring can be very difficult for farmers as farm work is intertwined with their identity and purpose. Transitioning requires clear communication and often involves difficult conversations (about farm operations and finances) with family members. Additionally, some farmers do not have a next generation to which to transition the farm. Planning ahead for farm transitions is also important for young farmers, not just those nearing retirement.

Areas for improvement in supporting aging farmers:

- **Access to care:** More resources, personnel, and services are needed, especially for basic preventative health, mental health, and counseling. Occupational therapy and medical students can help fill this gap, but their support is often short-lived as students graduate and research concludes. Long-lasting and sustainable relationships with rural communities are needed.
- **Funding and financial support:** Finding funding for services related to aging, agriculture, and rural life, can be challenging. For example, although farmers work well beyond the age of 60, some state assistance programs do not provide support for workers over 60. It might be helpful to move away from using age as a factor for evaluating qualification for this type of assistance.
- **Understanding and serving rural populations:** Rural healthcare practices are limited, and often difficult to establish and support. Furthermore, many healthcare providers and practitioners do not have an adequate understanding of the unique challenges farm communities face. It would be beneficial to add rural and agricultural health components in professional training curriculums.

Opportunities to better support aging farmers and farm communities:

- Encourage farmers to adopt protective health behaviors at an early age.
- Online resources & telehealth provide opportunities for getting help to those who need it.
- The agricultural environment could be better adapted to support female farm managers, as women tend to live longer than men and provide invaluable family and community support.
- Apprenticeship programs could match new farmers with those without heirs to take over the farm.
- Lawyers, and accountants, and farm business management programs (who often have direct relationships with farmers) can all help aging farmers with pre-planning and farm transitions.