



Study looks at making hearing protection a habit

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By Christine Souza



Sutter County farmer Jon Lavy, a member of the California Farm Bureau Federation Rural Health Committee, inserts earplugs as a safety precaution before mowing in a nearby orchard.

Photo/Christine Souza





Marjorie McCullagh, professor and director of the Occupational Health Nursing Program at the University of Michigan School of Nursing, instructs a farmer in the proper way to use hearing protection to prevent hearing loss.

Photo/University of Michigan School of Nursing

The daily work of agriculture involves tractors, mowers and grinders, power tools, barn fans and other equipment and elements that generate their unique sounds and decibel levels—and that can create a noisy work environment. That makes hearing protection an important aspect of farm safety, and led a nursing professor to explore the best ways to encourage farmers to make hearing protection a habit.

Farmers agree it's important to be in the habit of using hearing protection in order to reduce the risk of noise-induced hearing loss.

Sutter County farmer Jon Lavy, a member of the California Farm Bureau Federation Rural Health Committee, noted that farmers provide hearing protection for all of their employees, but added, "We (as farmers) don't use it near enough."

"There's plenty of old-timers that can't hear very well," Lavy said, "whether it is work related or from life in general."

He said ensuring a safe working environment on the farm is a priority for farmers. As employers, they instruct employees to use hearing protection, eye protection and more. Lavy added that this safety mindset is simply a part of being a farmer today.

"We're pretty much in air-conditioned cabs now—a lot of the equipment is nicer than it was 20 years ago, but they are still putting ear protection in cabs because the AC unit is loud and the cabs are kind of small," said Lavy, who keeps many different forms of hearing protection nearby—inside his truck, jacket pockets and stored on large equipment.

"It is a good safety precaution," he said. "If (hearing protection) is available and they are sitting near the armrest and I'm filling in for somebody, I'm putting ear protection in too."

Making earplugs and other protectors readily available is a successful way to increase use of hearing protection among farmers, according to a study published last year by Marjorie McCullagh, professor and director of the Occupational Health Nursing Program at the University of Michigan School of Nursing.

"As a result of frequent exposure to loud noise levels, farmers have a higher incidence of hearing loss than people in other occupations," McCullagh said. "A clinic in Iowa found that 70 percent of farmers who were given a hearing test had poorer than normal hearing for their age."

Noise-induced hearing loss is permanent but preventable, she said, noting that hearing loss occurs in both adults and young people who are exposed to farm-related noise.

With assistance from the American Farm Bureau Federation in selecting close to 500 farm operators for the study, McCullagh grouped farmers into five groups in which she tested three approaches:

- Exposure to an online educational program designed specifically for farmers;
- Exposure to a more interactive online education program directed at farmers;
- A non-educational approach where a package of various types of hearing protectors was shipped to participants.

"I had a good feeling that the convenience factor was going to be pivotal in getting people to adopt this behavior," McCullagh said. "The online program was demonstrated to be very valuable, quite effective, and the mailed package of hearing protectors was slightly better than that."

Study results showed the group that had the best use of hearing protectors were those farmers who received the package of mailed hearing protectors, although the study indicated improvement across the board.

"The best type of hearing protection is the type of hearing protection that you will use," McCullagh said. "I really believe that farmers have to know that noise is hazardous to their health—not just their hearing health, but their whole health—and that they need to be aware of their noise hazards at work and recreationally."

She encouraged farmers to take measures to safeguard their hearing, which could mean using hearing protection, buying quieter equipment or "keeping your distance from noisy equipment."

On his farm, Lavy said he discusses the importance of wearing hearing protection with employees among other topics during routine safety meetings.

"We have a safety meeting with all of our employees and we go through all of the topics, including heat illness, eye protection and wearing gloves and hearing protection; we talk about all of it," Lavy said. "It is part of our routine to preach safety, and ear protection is one of the safety precautions that we take."

Learn more about farm noise hearing loss and how to protect hearing at www.agrisafe.org/hearing-loss-prevention-resources.

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