

HOW TO SUPPORT SENIORS

For the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association
By Heather Watson, Executive Director, Farm Management Canada
With contributions from Elaine Froese, Farm Family Coach

Farming is a passion. It's a way of life. The farm is where you live, work, play and raise your family. It is where you honour the legacy of the generations that came before you, and build your dreams and those of future generations. In most cases, a number of generations are living and working on the farm together, and many farmers continue to farm well into their 70s and 80s. According to the 2016 Census of Agriculture¹, 34% of farm operators are 65 years or older (including 10% who are over 75 years of age), and these numbers are on the rise.

In general, our population is living longer, and with modern technology, they are able to do more.

When we talk about the farm passing from one generation to another (we call this “farm transition”), we recognize that most farmers do not want to simply “retire” from farming. In fact, for many farmers, this is an impossible proposition as farming is their life. What we tend to talk about is what farm family coach Elaine Froese calls “shifting roles” whereby farm families discuss the work that needs to be done on the farm and decide the best roles for each generation and person working on the farm. While managing the farm and all the responsibilities that come with it is passed onto the next generation, the current generation can do the things they love to do, such as drive tractor or share insights and advice, without the same level of responsibility for the business and its viability.

Farming is Canada's third most hazardous industry and risk factors escalate as farmers age.

¹ Statistics Canada. 2016 Census of Agriculture. Farm and Operator Data.
<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/95-640-x/95-640-x2016001-eng.htm>

² Elaine Froese www.ElaineFroese.com



While their passion for farming remains, farmers become more susceptible to work-related injuries as they move through their 60s and into their 70s and beyond.

In terms of physical health, factors including strength and flexibility, speed and reaction time, agility and balance, sight and hearing that can affect capacity to work safely. Hearing loss tends to be much higher in the farming population from excessive exposure to loud noise from machinery and animals. Sight also becomes increasingly challenging for farmers who work all hours of the day and night, and in poorly lit conditions such as barns, outbuildings and other farm structures. Physical capacity can also be affected by chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and respiratory diseases such as asthma. Prescriptions and medication may further reduce alertness and interfere with the ability to safely accomplish tasks.

In terms of mental health, we must consider conditions that may affect memory, thinking, behaviour and the ability to perform everyday activities. These can include dementia, anxiety, and depression.



Oftentimes, physical health can impact mental health, and vice versa. Declining physical capacity can lead to depression and feelings of isolation and worthlessness.

Conversations around capacity to work safely can be quite difficult, especially between generations. Having farmed their whole lives, farming practices and opinions on safety

become entrenched for senior farmers. However, it is not only their health and safety that is of concern, it is the health and safety of all those who could be impacted by an incident. This includes stress, anxiety, and bereavement as a result of injury, disability or death to the senior farmer, or an incident with someone else on the farm caused by them.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- 1. BE PROACTIVE**
- 2. COMMUNICATE**

Managing risk is about being proactive. Think in advance about potential risks and establish the means to minimize the chance of incidents from occurring.

Measures you can take to counter physical limitations of senior farmers include³:

- invest in new machinery with greater automation and safety features
- invest in new fence gates, doors and animal handling devices
- increase lighting levels
- install handrails and non-slip surfaces
- limit operation of machinery to daylight hours
- limit duration of work, and insist on regular breaks
- make arrangements for team work and have a policy of regular check ins
- provide a cell phone and other means of immediate communication available
- provide heart attack and stroke training to everyone working and living on the farm
- insist on regular medical check-ups for physical and mental health
- adjust roles to benefit from the wisdom and experience of the aging generation without compromising anyone's safety

In order to reduce the risk of age-related safety incidents on the farm, it is important to identify the tasks on the farm that carry greater risk with age, or may exceed the ability of aging farmers to accomplish safely. It is important to monitor the mental and physical capacities of aging farmers on a regular basis and adjust role(s) accordingly.

Communication is key. In order to be successful in the farm, the family, and for yourself, every farm should be having regular farm team meetings to discuss the strategic direction of the farm and operational activities. Conversations about the changing roles and opportunities for those who live and work on the farm are a necessary part of business continuity and transition planning. Respectful, transparent and honest conversations are critical.

³ Adapted from Safety for Aging Farmers (2002)
http://nasdonline.org/static_content/documents/67/d001618.pdf