

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, March 13 – 19, 2011

Work a plan for safety in confined spaces

by Theresa Whalen

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Think about the confined spaces on your farm - silos, grain bins, milk tanks, water cisterns, sprayers and manure pits, are but a few. It's often hard to get in and out of confined spaces, although not always. Some confined spaces are open at the top. And it may be tough to get a breath of fresh air when you're inside, unless you're prepared. In fact, the potential for immediate serious injury or death is high in every confined space on the farm.

"Confined space incidents in agriculture are largely preventable," says Marcel Hacault, executive director of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA). "It's a matter of understanding the dangers and preparing everyone on the farm to work safely in and around confined spaces."

A confined space can be any enclosed or partially enclosed space not designed or intended for people to work in. It does not distinguish itself by size, shape or nature of the work performed within. It may have limited or restricted entry or exit, making it difficult to provide first aid, evacuation, rescue or other emergency response services for anyone inside. It is not meant for human occupancy, so when humans enter, they must do so with the utmost of care and preparation.

"The incidents that occur in confined spaces are rare events. They are difficult to predict and very expensive to prevent," explains Neil McManus, Consulting Industrial Hygienist with NorthWest Occupational Health and Safety www.nwohs.com in B.C. "You must get instruments and determine conditions and prepare for entry, just like industry does. The conditions are the same. You may take 1,000 readings and get only one irregular one – however if you didn't take that reading – you could die! In agriculture, because many operations are micro businesses, these events have a devastating result."

There are several things you can do to make confined spaces safer. First - identify them. Then learn about hazardous conditions that could be present. Mark every confined space to indicate danger and help prevent entry. Then look for ways to make changes so that entry is no longer necessary. Perhaps equipment in the spaces can be redesigned or relocated so the work can be done from outside the space.

If you must enter an identified confined space on your farm, ensure that a qualified person has assessed the hazards and prepared a written safe work procedure for you. Contact your provincial farm safety organization for assistance. For more information on this and other topics on farm safety also visit www.planfarmsafety.ca as well as www.farsha.bc.ca and www.farmsafety.ca.

Provide training for everyone on the farm who may have duties related to the confined space. Get all the required equipment and know how to use it properly to ensure you have control of the working conditions. Ventilation and testing are critically important to ensuring safety in confined spaces.

Document responsibilities and duties. And don't forget – in most provinces, the farm owner is also responsible for ensuring that any contractors who do work on their farm are also trained and competent to enter confined spaces and follow work procedures prepared by a qualified person. All contractors should be able to give you a copy of their workplace safety training summary for your files. The farmer also has the legal duty to inform contractors, as well as employees, about all hazardous conditions on the farm prior to starting work or to deliver the service.

“Plan • Farm • Safety” is the three-year theme of the Canadian Agricultural Safety campaign. Each aspect of the theme is being promoted with a year-long campaign. Last year the campaign highlighted “Plan” with safety walkabouts and planning for safety. This year, the focus is on “Farm” including implementation, documentation and training. And next year, emphasis will be on “Safety” including assessment, improvement and further development of safety systems.

The year-long “Farm” campaign will be launched with Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW), March 13 to 19. The Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) and Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) deliver CASW in partnership with Farm Credit Canada and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

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