

EASTERN LIMITS

SAFETY FIRST LOUD AND CLEAR

With Canadian Agricultural Safety Week right around the corner March 14-20, it happened almost on cue... another narrowly averted farm worker disaster.

This particular incident took place March 3 in Ottawa's rural reaches, at North Gower Grains. That's where rescue crews spent most of the day trying to liberate a worker from a prison of heavy corn after he became trapped inside a bin.

Other men have been smothered to death in such situations. This guy came out of the bin with little more than hunger pains. With St. Patrick's Day also around the corner March 17, this worker might have benefited from some advance Luck o' the Irish. It's unclear what the unidentified man was doing inside the bin; trying to dislodge some jammed kernels, perhaps! Suddenly, tonnes of corn collapsed around him, trapping him and making movement impossible. Rescuers fought against time to help the victim breathe against the dead weight of all that corn. They fashioned a protective wooden box around him to ease the pressure and gave him an oxygen mask. Finally, working through a hole cut in the side of the silo, rescuers were able to vacuum out enough corn from around the trapped man to pull him out and lower him to the ground. He suffered no serious injuries. At this writing, we don't know exactly what happened that day at North Gower Grains. It would seem obvious, however, that whatever happened serves as another reminder of how quickly things can go horribly wrong when working around the farm.

That's what Safety Week is all about. This year, the theme focuses on planning for safety, with farmers encouraged to do walkabouts to identify sensitive areas and situations. Next year, the focus shifts to implementing safety measures, documentation and training. In the third year of a three-pronged approach, the emphasis turns to improvement and further development of safety systems. It's all good preparation for "Certified Safe Farms", a concept which Safety Week sponsors say is on its way. While pieces of the program have been developed in several provinces, the Canadian Centre for Health and Safety in Agriculture is putting together a broad approach; a five-year study has been proposed to determine if financial incentives would help reduce current unacceptable death and injury rates in Canadian agriculture.

Financial incentives! That's the carrot with Certified Safe Farms. It offers a uniform safety system with the primary goal of reducing farm-related injuries and illnesses while passing along associated savings to farmers, insurers and agribusinesses.

The Safety Week partners – Canadian Federation of Agriculture, Farm Credit Canada, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and Canadian Agricultural Safety Association – are also promoting the notion of making safety awareness an employment condition. Hiring workers with appropriate skills protects farmers from costly risks while helping to ensure the health and safety of employees.

With the Ottawa Valley Farm Show landing smack in the middle of Canadian Farm Safety Week, show sponsors the Ottawa Valley Seed Growers Association and management – that's me – plan to place some emphasis on the safety issues. As usual, veteran Eastern Ontario safety consultant Sheila James will be staffing the Farm Safety Association booth in the Coliseum building. Tackling a health issue to which farmers are particularly sensitive, hearing tests will be held and advanced hearing aid technology explained throughout the show by Robillard Hearing Centres. And every day at 1 pm, Sheila will present a workshop introducing farmers to core responsibilities under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

"Safety on the farm is no longer voluntary... it's required," Sheila states in her usual no-nonsense style. We heard you loud and clear, Sheila!