

By Larry Reichenberger

Farm Rescue lends a hand

Neighbors helping neighbors in a new era

A strong sense of community has long spurred farmers to pull out of their own fields and help a neighbor in need. That spirit hasn't changed, but the reality of modern agriculture makes such stewardship increasingly difficult. Consequently, there's need for a new way for rural neighbors to lend a hand.

Three years ago, former North Dakota farm boy Bill Gross saw that need and started Farm Rescue, an organization of traveling good samaritans bent on helping farmers in crisis. "The demographics of agriculture have changed—there are fewer farms, farm families are smaller, and operations are more scattered. It's more difficult today for farmers to help neighbors in crisis, so we started a formal organization for that purpose," says Gross.

In the last three years, Farm Rescue has helped 67 farmers in need of

assistance by planting or harvesting crops critical to their farm's survival. "We want to provide one-time help to farmers who can't get major field work done because of illness, injury, or a natural disaster. Hopefully, this help will get them back in the field the following season," says Gross.

Volunteers and donations. Farm Rescue, located in Jamestown, N.D., (www.farmrescue.org) operates on volunteer help and donated equipment and financing. Exclusive machinery sponsor RDO Equipment Co. furnished two combines and two planting rigs last season—a value of nearly \$1.25 million. More than 100

▶**Right:** Farm Rescue volunteer Mark Monge (left) and Bill Gross worked with operator Gene Spichke to harvest soybeans for Damian Kappenman last fall. ▶**Below:** A 2006 tornado destroyed all the buildings and 90% of the machinery on Kappenman's Eureka, S.D. farm.



other donors share the \$250,000 annual operating costs and roughly 50 active volunteers—led by a core group of retired farmers—do the work.

"It's rewarding to see the excitement when we arrive and the gratitude when we finish," says volunteer Gene Spichke, retired farmer from Butte, N.D. "I've always wanted to help people—this really feels good."

Lending a hand. Gross leads Farm Rescue in time away from his career piloting a 747 for UPS. His efforts earned a speaking spot on volunteerism at the 2008 Republican National Convention and recognition as a candidate for CNN's Hero of the Year.

That recognition is well deserved, according to Damian and Martha Kappenman, whose Eureka, S.D., farm was destroyed by a tornado in 2006. "There really aren't the words to express our gratitude," says Damian.

Gross says Farm Rescue, which operates in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota, is only able to help half the requests it receives. "There's also interest from other farm states, but any expansion will require sponsorship from those areas," he says. ■

▶**Below:** Damian Kappenman was among 36 farmers helped last year. More than 100 sponsors and 50 volunteers make up Farm Rescue.

