

U.S.-based Farm Rescue

**Old-time,
pitch-in-and-help
model of farm
assistance with a
21st century twist**

By Richard Kamchen



Farm Rescue founder Bill Gross had the idea that he'd like to become "a random good Samaritan," buying himself a big John Deere tractor and going around planting crops for families who could use the help. And that's exactly what he did.

A successful U.S. volunteer group that provides assistance to sick and injured farmers has caught the attention of a Manitoba farmer who'd like to see the idea adopted here and spread across the Prairies.

Abe Loepky, an active Keystone Agricultural Producers member for about 25 years, first heard about Farm Rescue on a Jamestown, North Dakota radio station while farming some of his land just off the U.S. border.

"I was quite excited about it," said Loepky, who serves on the KAP District 4 board in southeastern Manitoba. After checking out the Farm Rescue booth at the Big Iron Farm Show in West Fargo, he knew he'd come upon a good idea.

"I just thought this is a win-win situation for agriculture."

His resolution that urged taking a closer look at the group that helps farmers in need plant and harvest their crops passed at KAP's 29th annual meeting.

Traditionally, "whenever something goes awry, usually somebody will pitch in and help get the seeding done, but as farm help gets more and more scarce, I think this could be a good fit," Loepky said.

He envisions KAP working with Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan and Alberta Federation of Agriculture to

create a Prairie-wide service.

"I certainly would think with the right approach, we could have the same thing in the western provinces. It's just part of our mindset: If somebody's in trouble, everybody likes to do what they can to help the person along."

Farm Rescue is the brainchild of Bill Gross, a 47-year-old Boeing 747 captain. He's been flying across the globe for UPS over the past 20 years after piloting with Pan Am. But his roots are on the farm, having grown up on a 2,500 head cattle family operation near Cleveland, North Dakota.

His philanthropy goes back many years, to when he went on missionary trips overseas, in countries like Romania and Croatia, helping build houses, working in orphanages and teaching bible studies.

But one day it dawned on him that perhaps he could provide help closer to home. He didn't know what, but then, while discussing retirement plans with his fellow pilots, he had the idea that he'd like to become "a random good Samaritan," buying himself a big John Deere tractor and going around planting crops for families who could use the help."

"Unenthusiastic" might charitably describe his colleagues' reactions.

But while his peers might have thought him a bit mad, his friend Kenneth Mateer,

a chaplain in the U.S. military, offered encouragement when Gross told him of his intentions.

But instead of waiting for retirement, Mateer urged Gross to start then – because you never know what tomorrow will bring, he reminded him. Gross, who had no wife or children, couldn't think of a reason to wait.

"In the big cities, there's lots of non-profits that help everything from cats and dogs to drug abuse," he said. "But what is



Abe Loepky, an active KAP member from District 4, first heard about Farm Rescue on a U.S. radio station and thought it could be "a win-win situation" for agriculture in Manitoba.

there to help the farm families when there's an injury or illness, and they need to get their crop planted or harvested to maintain their livelihood? Other than just good-hearted neighbours, there's really nothing out there."

Gross saw for himself the devastation that can occur when farms can't sustain themselves. In the 1980s, it was an income crisis that wiped out farms across the country, which in turn also devastated surrounding rural communities.

"In my town, the kids all left the farm. Pretty soon the public schools closed down, and after that, the grocery store, the gas station, the bar. Everything closed down. There's just an elevator there by some railroad tracks and there's a post office," said Gross. "It bothered me that that happened to my own home town, but it's happening all across America."

In 2006, Farm Rescue began in earnest as Gross and his volunteers planted crops for 10 farm families. The effort attracted a good deal of positive media coverage, and the organization itself grew – more volunteers, more sponsors, and more farm families helped. In 2007, it



Farm Rescue volunteers from Iowa, Illinois, Florida, Minnesota and North Dakota assemble to plant a crop for a farmer in North Dakota who had a detached retina.



Farm Rescue harvests a crop for a Minnesota farmer whose wife had terminal cancer.

was 20 families that received help, and now, in Farm Rescue's seventh year, up to 50 farm families will have benefited by the time harvest is complete.

Currently operating in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and eastern Montana, Farm Rescue provides planting and/or harvesting assistance, free of charge, to farm families who have experienced a major injury, illness or natural disaster. All the farmers need to provide is the fuel, seed and fertilizer.

Farm Rescue's equipment is sponsored, as is the fuel to move it from location to location. Funds for insurance, lodging, and per diems for volunteers also come from sponsors such as feed and fertilizer companies, and banks.

About half the farm families who've needed Farm Rescue have applied directly, either calling to get an application or applying online. But the other half sometimes needs a nudge in the right direction. Farmers tend to be very independent and self-sufficient, sometimes to a fault, and might

be hesitant to ask for help, said Gross. That's why Farm Rescue allows neighbours or businesses to anonymously refer a farm family to his group.

The work is completed by about 500 volunteers, some of whom have lent a hand seven years in a row. They come from all walks of life, and pay their own way in flying in from all over the country.

"We have a minister who comes out of Oregon with a commercial driver's license, and he drives our semi-trucks. We've got pilots that come from UPS, FedEx, Delta, to volunteer. We've got doctors, attorneys, people that work for Intel in management. People from Wal-Mart, too," Gross said, adding Farm Rescue even provides training to its volunteers.

"We have volunteers that have come from New York that have never driven a tractor or combine in their lives. Actually, we've had a few who've never been on a farm in their life."

Can the Canadian Prairies replicate this success? Only time will tell. ▶

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