

When South Dakota farmer Regan Homandberg headed home from a neighboring town on a January day in 2009, he figured he could make it home safely if he drove slowly. Although the road was a sheet of ice, his careful driving paid off—until the car began to skid and went spinning off the road. “I said, ‘Hang on!’ and that’s all I remember,” said Homandberg, who was ejected from the car and broke his back, ribs, shoulder, and right knee. After doctors installed two rods and 10 screws in his back, Homandberg faced a long recovery. The challenge became even greater when spring planting time arrived. While Homandberg didn’t know how he would get all the work done, volunteers from Farm Rescue came to his aid and helped plant his crop.

“Farm Rescue is kind of an angel in disguise,” said Elmer Homandberg, Regan’s father, who has farmed near Alcester, SD for decades. “You couldn’t ask for better people than their volunteers.”

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

North Dakota-based Farm Rescue, which helps family farmers bridge crises so they have an opportunity to continue viable operations, provides planting and harvesting assistance at no charge to farm families that have experienced a major illness, injury, or natural disaster. The nonprofit organization, which has worked with farmers since 2006, is the dream of Bill Gross, a North Dakota native and full-time pilot for UPS Airlines. Like so many other farm kids, Gross was encouraged by his parents to leave the family farm near Cleveland, ND, to pursue a better life.

“While I left the farm, my heart never left the farm,” said Gross, a Boeing 747 captain who flies all over the world. “I always wanted to help farm families, and Farm Rescue has created a win-win for everyone.”

While Farm Rescue does not give money to farmers, the organization provides the labor and farm equipment to plant or harvest up to 1,000 acres per farm family. Families are responsible for providing crop inputs, including seed, fertilizer, and fuel. Farm Rescue, which assisted 10 families during its first year, has now helped more than 100 farm families in North Dakota, South Dakota, western Minnesota, and eastern Montana. The organization is supported through the generosity of sponsors in those states. RDO Equipment Company, for example, supplies the implements Farm Rescue uses, including John Deere 9630 tractors, John Deere 9760 combines with 35-foot headers, and John Deere 1890 no-till planters.

Farm Rescue also relies on an extensive network of volunteers who come from Alaska to Florida to run the equipment. “When we started, we had a little database of 30 or 40 people,” said Gross, who notes that the database now contains more than 1,000 names. “We continue to get requests every week from more people who want to help, and we can always use more volunteers.”

While Farm Rescue prefers volunteers who have some farm experience, they do train some people. These men and women handle a variety of tasks, from running the equipment and hauling fuel to planning the route the crew will take as Farm Rescue moves from farm to farm. Volunteers work in teams of four to six people, and multiple crews work in different areas during the busy planting and harvesting seasons. While some families only need Farm Rescue’s help for a day, volunteers are typically onsite for three to four days, working in eight-hour shifts. During planting season, the volunteers run the equipment 24 hours a day.

The volunteers come from all walks of life, said Gross, who takes off four weeks or more each year to work in the fields with Farm Rescue. “Serving with Farm Rescue is our way of giving back. Some of our volunteers even bring their entire family to help.”

Charles Bartsch, a retired North Dakota farmer and rancher who oversaw 2009 harvest operations in his home state for Farm Rescue, is glad he got involved. “When you see the smiles and tears on the faces of the farm families you are helping, you can see that they truly appreciate what we are doing for them. Working with the volunteers and having a great time together makes the work easier, too.”

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Best Practice: Giving Back

Because Farm Rescue’s primary source of funding comes from sponsorships, the organization will be able to expand to more states when more sponsors get involved, said Farm Rescue founder Bill Gross, who noted that more than 95% of the organization’s sponsors renew each year. VistaComm is proud to support Farm Rescue’s mission, said Troy Long, VistaComm president.

“From Bill Byrne, our CEO, to our associates, we’re a company of farm kids who have always maintained a strong interest in rural America. We also appreciate the dedicated farmers who form our clients’ customer base. When Farm Rescue helped my Grandpa Elmer Homandberg and Uncle Regan out last spring in South Dakota, I witnessed firsthand how Farm Rescue gives farm families a priceless opportunity to continue their livelihood.”

Organizations interested in supporting Farm Rescue can find sponsorship information on their Web site, www.farmrescue.org.

SEE MORE:

Watch Farm Rescue spread a sense of rural community at www.vistacomm.com.

FARM RESCUE: SERVING THOSE IN NEED

With an annual cash budget of \$275,000 and two employees, Farm Rescue is not able to assist every farm family in need. Since Farm Rescue receives about twice as many applications as the number of families it can help per year, the organization's eight-member board selects the most valid cases. Applicants must be actively engaged in farming and have at least three years of experience operating their own farm. To help the maximum number of families, Farm Rescue evaluates

applications based on the severity of the case, the family's financial standing, and the logistics of efficiently bringing a crew to the farm.

"Farmers are independent, hard-working people who tend to think they can handle everything themselves and often do not want to ask for help, so friends, relatives, or neighbors submit referrals of farm families to Farm Rescue about half the time," Gross said. "I always encourage farmers to ask for help,

however, when they need it."

Farm Rescue's efforts have not gone unnoticed. The organization has been featured in many local and national media outlets, including *People* magazine, the Associated Press, and DIRECTV. Gross has been named one of CNN's 2008 "Heroes" and has received the Robert Feder Humanitarian Award. In addition, Farm Rescue has been honored with the Innovative Program of the Year award from a leading association for nonprofits.

Always a visionary with big dreams, Gross hopes Farm Rescue's efforts will not only tide families through a crisis, but allow their

children to remain on the farm and contribute to vibrant rural communities in the years to come. Minnesota farmers David and Shirley Reiffenberger, who relied on Farm Rescue to help plant their crops in the spring of 2009, know the organization's impact is long lasting.

"They are like one big family: there with open arms to help you any way they can," said Shirley, who noted that David had to undergo emergency open heart surgery in January of 2009—less than a year after a tornado damaged many buildings on the couple's farm. "Farm Rescue is a real blessing." *

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