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## PROGRESS 2009 AG & INDUSTRY:

### Bill Gross and Farm Rescue gain momentum and national acclaim

By Matt Bewley, Agweek

When United Parcel Service pilot Bill Gross would daydream about his retirement, he often saw himself driving a tractor up and down North Dakota's gravel roads and pulling into farmyards where it looked as if the folks there could use a hand with planting their crops. Thanks to some good advice and the determination of a retired farmer from Voltaire, N.D., the idea has come to mean a rescued growing season to more than 60 farm families in the Upper Midwest, beneficiaries of the good work being done by Gross and his band of dedicated volunteers at Farm Rescue.

In December, Gross was selected as one of CNN's 2008 "Heroes," bringing national and international attention to Farm Rescue, the relief organization he'd started just a few years before. He is excited to see the word getting out so well. "More families that may need the assistance are finding out about Farm Rescue, and therefore, we are helping more families," he said. "It is a win-win for everyone."



**Bill Gross, founder of Farm Rescue is winning a North Dakota award for innovation in non-profit organizations, and has earned top public service awards for UPS, where he is a Seattle-based pilot. Herald file photo by Mikkel Pates.**

In its first year, Farm Rescue helped 10 farm families who were in dire straits because of illness or injury. Volunteers drove donated equipment and planted their crops for them, saving their year. In just two more years, the organization would help 57 more farm families and accept several awards for its service to others.

Farm Rescue has received awards such as the Abby Agribusiness, Commitment to Agriculture and Innovative Program of the year. Media coverage has included "The Today Show," Paul

Harvey, Ed Schultz, Joel Heitkamp, RFD TV, America's Heartland, People Magazine and Agweek.

The awards, recognition and media coverage also have helped the organization gain support from business, foundations and the general public, Gross said.

Volunteer e-mails started pouring in by the hundreds after the CNN coverage. People from all over the country wanted to come and help Farm Rescue.

"It has also brought attention to the realities and importance of farming to our country," Gross said. "We received e-mails and donations from all over the United States. As a matter of fact, we

received donations from as far away as Europe. I sincerely believe that something big has been started through Farm Rescue.”

### **Farm-raised**

Gross grew up on a cattle ranch about 80 miles east Bismarck, the youngest of John Jr. and Lorraine Gross’ five children.

“We were your typical farmers,” he said. “We farmed mostly cattle, but we did farm to support those cattle, raising oats and wheat and corn for silage. At one point, we had over 2,500 head of Hereford cattle.”

As a boy, he was more inclined to work on the machinery than tend the cattle, though he did take his turn at feeding them and grinding hay and oats.

The Gross children were raised with Christian values and were encouraged to help other people and get involved in volunteer activities, he said. They had heard the stories of tougher times passed down from his grandfather and great-grandfather, who had homesteaded the ranch. His father set the example, always ready to help when a neighbor was in need.

“I know, of course, of stories, like all farmers do, where he went and helped people, neighbors and such,” Gross said. “And that was not unusual then, of course. People still do it nowadays, only it’s less prevalent because there are fewer farms and less children.” Gross’ parents also encouraged him to get a college education, telling him he always could return to the farm if he chose. He enrolled in UND’s flight training program in 1984.

He worked hard and trained hard, completing in his first two semesters what usually took four years. “Most students went out to the airport and flew one lesson probably three times a week,” he said. “I went out every day, and I flew three lessons a day.” Two years later, he certified as a flight instructor and airline transport pilot, though still in school. He instructed student pilots and flew university faculty members to Bismarck on Tuesdays for business meetings.

“That helped me build quite a few hours of flight time, which helped me get a job sooner than a lot of other people who graduated,” he said. Gross graduated magna cum laude in 1988 and took a job flying Boeing 727s throughout the Western Hemisphere for Pan American World Airways. When Pan Am went out of business in 1991, he signed on with a commuter airline for three years, flying smaller aircraft. He then joined UPS. At 42, he now captains Boeing 747 cargo planes for UPS from Anchorage, Alaska, to Hawaii, Australia, China, Europe and the Middle East. He is unmarried and lives in Seattle.

### **Random acts of kindness**

In 2001, Gross started going on mission trips with the University Presbyterian Church. He went to Romania, Croatia and other regions affected by the Yugoslav-Serbian war, which had ended in 1995. He helped rebuild houses, worked with refugees that had fled the war and also helped orphans in Romania. “I always felt it was good to help people,” he said. “But I always thought there must be something that could be done closer to home. Something that I know how to do and maybe other people don’t know how to do.”

Gross often spent 12-plus hours in the pilot's seat flying across the Pacific Ocean, often chatting with the other pilots about their plans after they retired from flying. It was during this in-flight fantasizing that his desire to help people gradually acquired shape. "I'm going to get myself a big John Deere four-wheel-drive tractor and a planter, and I'm going to be this random Good Samaritan," he recalled saying. "I'm going to go out and start on one end of North Dakota and drive down the gravel road and pull into the farm of a family that looks like maybe they could use some help — maybe they have some used equipment, trying to make a go of it — and pull in at 6 in the morning, and say, 'Hey, I'm here, and I'll plant you a couple hundred acres today, free of charge.' "

People chuckled and thought it was a funny idea, and some people even thought it was kind of a crazy idea, he said. But to the farm boy-turned-pilot, it seemed perfectly reasonable.

"A lot of people, when they retire, they go on cruises and on vacations and spend a fair amount of money," he said. "But I didn't really have any interest in doing all that because I had already traveled all over the world. Frankly, when I retire, I don't want to go anywhere."

He told an old college roommate, Kevin Mateer, of his plan. Mateer, an army chaplain, liked the idea, and offered some advice.

"He said, 'Bill, you have a noble idea, but you need to think bigger,'" Gross said. "'What you're thinking about doing might help a few families. It might be fun, and some people might think it's funny that there's this old retired guy going out being this random Good Samaritan.'"

But he told his friend to think in terms of helping more than just a few families. He suggested getting volunteers and businesses involved and registering as a nonprofit organization.

"That was the first major piece of advice he gave me," Gross said. "The second major piece of advice he gave me, he said, 'Bill, why wait until you retire? You don't know what happens in life. It may never come.' He encouraged me to do it now. Upon driving away from that house, it just all fell into place. I thought, 'This is it. I'm going to do it now.'"

It all came quickly together for him as he put his friend's advice to work, and within a few weeks, Farm Rescue came into being. "In my own mind, I think of it as a mission field," he said. "It's putting together my thoughts on helping people ... and doing what I know how to do. It's where I came from — my roots — and putting all that together to work for good."

### **Boots on the ground**

The next spring, on vacation from UPS, Gross found himself sitting atop a John Deere 9520 tractor, pulling a 42-foot no-till planter for Matt and Laura Biel in Lefor, N.D. Matt recently had lost his right hand to a grain auger and still was rehabilitating. His farm would be the first recipient of Farm Rescue's support.

Gross was not alone in the venture. He had secured the tractor and planter from RDO Equipment Company, a multistate supplier, and enlisted the help of two other farmers to do the work.

He had committed to helping 10 families get their crops in the ground. If Farm Rescue could pull it off, it would bring some much-needed credibility to the fledgling organization. He already had put about \$5,000 of his own money into the project and needed to attract more donors.

Bill Krumwiede and Joe Dethlefsen were his first two volunteers. Krumwiede, a retired farmer from Voltaire, would become a driving force at Farm Rescue.

“You know how farming never leaves a person’s blood,” Gross said. “I knew retired farmers would want to help. They have seen the tough times ... and have strong, heartfelt ties to farming.”

They ran the equipment day and night. Gross usually would run through the night and hand it over at about 6 in the morning to Krumwiede, who would run into late evening before Gross could get him out of the cab.

“He put in long hours,” Gross said of his friend, who often worked 16 to 18 hours in a day. “I was a little nervous that first year. We had to get it done with those first 10 families. Bill always would just say, ‘We’ll get it done, Bill. Don’t worry.’” They operated at night at every farm. Krumwiede kept bolstering Gross’ hopes as they took turns at the wheel. And they got it done.

“We helped 10 families across North Dakota in 2006. I was pretty proud,” Gross said. “In some ways, it was a small number. In other ways, it was a big number.”

Without Krumwiede, Gross said, the Farm Rescue program would not have been as successful as it is. “He is an unbelievable guy, a complete angel,” Gross said.

### **Reaching farther**

The first year’s success story got the attention of more media outlets, a critical ingredient to most any nonprofit organization’s bottom line. Business and private donations grew and more people were volunteering to help out. Gross ensured that Farm Rescue didn’t lose sight of its original goal.

“We’ve stuck to our roots. We like to think we still help the small, the medium farmer,” he said. “That’s who we’re out to help.”

In 2007, Farm Rescue doubled the number of farms it helped and also helped with harvest, operating in North Dakota, South Dakota and western Minnesota. They helped 36 farm families stay afloat through 2008, adding Montana to their operations area.

For 2009, RDO, now Farm Rescue’s sole equipment supplier, will be providing two new tractor-planter rigs, and Gross has been told he can expect more in 2010. Walmart has donated \$10,000 to Farm Rescue and UPS has donated \$11,000 —just two of more than 100 sponsors from the business community.

The organization now employs a director of operations and one office staffer and soon will be looking for a third person to relieve the workload, he said.

“I am still hands-on virtually every day with Farm Rescue,” he said. “There is so much work to do with fundraising, media, applications for assistance, sponsorships, logistics, long-term planning, training volunteers, etc.” But he still is a 747 captain with a full schedule, crisscrossing the Pacific. That much time in the cockpit might keep others out of the cab, but not this North Dakota farm boy. “Yes, I still drive the tractors,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I still run the equipment at night when we are trying to get a lot of work done in a 24-hour period.” He usually takes the shifts that other people may have trouble filling.

Going forward, 2009 and 2010 look to be even more interesting for Farm Rescue, as it again expands its operations area and takes on new roles in helping farm families. Gross plans to remain the primary person handling media and larger sponsorship relations, but wants to stay involved, when time permits, in the operations on the land. He still loves to fly, and flying is what supports him, but Farm Rescue will continue to be a large portion of his life and the primary way he reaches out to other people, well after he hangs up his wings, he said.

“I do love working on the land as a farmer,” he said. “After all, I came from a family farm, and farming will always be in my heart.”

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