



## Farm Rescue Assists Area Producer

**By Richard Volesky, Editor/Reporter**  
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BEACH, ND - Randy Thooft says helping bring a farmer's wheat harvest to an end is his way of paying it forward.

Thooft, of Marshall, Minn., was among a group of five Farm Rescue volunteers who were assisting Beach farmer Steve Szudera with his harvest on Aug. 21. Szudera was burned in a combine fire earlier this month.

"I enjoy this and up to a few days ago, I've never seen western North Dakota," said Thooft, while operating a combine in one of Szudera's fields south of Beach. "It's my way of paying it forward."

"I know that this is a farmer's paycheck," Thooft said, looking at the combine's reels as they swept in Szudera's wheat.

Farm Rescue, a non-profit organization based in Horace, N.D., assists farmers with spring planting, haying or harvesting after major injuries, illnesses or natural disasters. The organization was founded by Bill Gross, a native of Cleveland, N.D., in 2005. More than 300 farms have since been assisted.

Szudera was also operating a combine in his fields on Aug. 21, with a bandage visible on his left arm and extending to his back. At harvest time, little can deter a farmer's laser-like focus on getting the crops in.

Some farmers with more serious injuries are unable to assist with their own harvest, and Szudera's case is more of an exception.

Szudera said he was unloading grain from his combine earlier this month when he noticed it was on fire. He said he was unsure of the fire's cause.

Two of his trucks were nearby, and to save the trucks, he said he went back into the combine's cab to move it away. That's when flames reached him.

A few area residents encouraged Szudera to apply for Farm Rescue for help. Szudera said he usually combines his hundreds of acres by himself.



"I called them, but didn't get the application in until late in the day," said Szudera. "They called the next day and approved the application right away."

Through Farm Rescue, the farmer pays for the cost of fuel, but Farm Rescue provides the use of equipment and volunteers. Volunteers usually have experience with operating farm equipment or have commercial driver's licenses. Thooft, for example, farms in Minnesota, but his corn and soybeans won't be harvested until later this fall, so he was able to donate time to the program.

Volunteer Mark Baumgarten, from Bettendorf, Iowa, previously farmed near Casselton, and worked in marketing and sales for John Deere. He explained that Farm Rescue has two harvest crew operating, with the other crews working in the Garrison area last week.

Volunteer Rick Davidson, from Alexandria, Minn, said it's the responsibility of the volunteers to get to wherever the Farm Rescue equipment happens to be located, but the organization covers costs related to meals and motel rooms. While in Beach for breakfast, however, a local farmer paid for the breakfast for the entire Farm Rescue crew, Davidson added.

Rounding out the crew of volunteers was Phil Jung, who is retired from the Air Force, and was driving a grain truck, and his wife, Pauline, who was helping shuttle vehicles. The Jungs are from Utah, said Baumgarten.

Farm Rescue has had more than 200 business sponsors and about 1,000 volunteers over the years. RDO Equipment Company provides the equipment, while trailers are from Wilson Trailer, and Puklich Chevrolet of Bismarck, and Ryan Chevrolet of Minot provide pickups. Other major sponsors are Bremer Bank, and the Leona and Harry Helmsley Charitable Trust.

Farm Rescue's coverage area is North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and eastern Montana.

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