

Farm Rescue steps in to help farmers and their neighbors



Photo by Andrea Johnson.

Farm Rescue unloads corn from John and Sheree Dubbels farm near Fergus Falls.

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FERGUS FALLS, Minn. – On a winter-like day in late October, John and Sheree Dubbels are at Mayo Clinic in Olmsted County, Minn.

The Otter Tail County farmers are about 250 miles from home, as John is receiving treatment for leukemia.

It's impossible to run the combine when you're in the hospital, so back home, a Farm Rescue crew harvests their 400 acres of corn.

Farm Rescue Volunteer Levi Wielenga of Sioux City, Iowa drives the combine.

“We help not only the farmer that is challenged, but we also help their neighbors that do not have time to pitch in and help like they may have in the past,” Wielenga said. “That’s why we’re here.”

Another four Farm Rescue volunteers – Keith Barkema of Klemme, Iowa; Dan Feige, Wentworth, S.D.; Dwayne Diers, Howard Lake, Minn., and Wayland Adams of Albuquerque, N.M – run a tractor and grain cart, plus two semis with trailers.

They haul the corn back to the Dubbels’ farm site where it is binned, and managed by John’s brother, Paul.

Even though it’s cold and windy, the Farm Rescue team smiles and talks with visitors at the corn field.

That’s because the Dubbels’ corn harvest represents the 300th producer helped by the eight-year-old Farm Rescue organization.

The Dubbels are also the 25th producer to receive aid in Minnesota.

Farm Rescue is a nonprofit organization that offers a professional level of assistance to farmers or ranchers in trouble due to health concerns or natural disasters.

They encourage sponsors, friends and neighbors to refer farm families that are in need of planting, haying or harvesting assistance due to a major injury, illness or natural disaster.

Often, it is a neighbor or business that anonymously refers a farm family to Farm Rescue via phone or email.

The office of Farm Rescue then contacts the family to see if they could use a helping hand to make it through an unexpected crisis.

The family fills out an application and then the Farm Rescue Board of Directors meets with them via phone or email and quickly determines if the case warrants the non-profit organization's help.

They try to say yes as often as possible, said Carol Wielenga, who is married to Levi and coordinates field activities.

"We do about 90 percent of the cases that come to us that are qualifying as injury, illness or natural disaster," she said.

Each case is unique, she added.

Some producers are present while the crew works in the fields.

In other cases, farmers remain in hospital beds or are dealing with more pressing issues.

"There are a lot of farm accidents, or cancer, surgeries, strokes and disease," she said. "Whatever you can think of – we have likely dealt with it.

"Farmers are so used to working their land. Having to ask for help – it's hard, but it's why we're here."

The Wielengas began volunteering with Farm Rescue in 2011. Carol was hired as program coordinator in January 2014, although Levi still volunteers. She works closely with farmers, ranchers and volunteers, and oversees each rescue operation.

"I'm very grateful for what Farm Rescue has done for Carol and I," Levi said. "I choose to do it. I get my farming fix, and it helps me grow as a person, and gives lots of challenges and scenarios. It's a good character building experience for me. You meet really awesome people."

For Levi, that includes volunteer Keith Barkema of Klemme, Iowa.

Keith Barkema

Barkema shut down his own combine in north central Iowa to help with the Dubbels' corn harvest.

He started volunteering for Farm Rescue in the spring of 2014.

"I could never get away because I'm planting in the spring, or harvesting in the fall, but this year they added haying – and I could do the haying part," he said.

He baled hay in North Dakota for 12 days this summer. Then he helped fix a Farm Rescue semi in Iowa that stayed at his farm until spring wheat harvest began.

He brought the semi to North Dakota on Labor Day. The wheat harvest began before soybean harvest back home, so he helped with that too.

“For 17 days, I was out in a wheat field,” he said. “It was fun. Every time I’ve come out here, it just doesn’t get any better – helping somebody in trouble. We’ll get it done.”

In his 50s, Keith was brought up to respect the value and importance of work.

He knows how to fix trucks, get the combine ready for the day, work on augers and do other mechanical jobs. He also can drive equipment.

“Somebody taught me how to do all of this,” he said. “I’ve shared it with my son. Now I’ve shared some of the things I’ve learned about fixing trucks with some of the people in Farm Rescue.”

“Farm Rescue has taught me a few things. It’s just good.”

Farm Rescue harvested for 13 farmers across the Upper Midwest in 2014.

They try to help about 50 farming operations annually, depending on the need.

Not only grateful for volunteers, the Farm Rescue organization is also thankful for all of the sponsors, Carol said.

RDO Equipment Company has been the equipment sponsor since 2006, with RDO Truck Centers providing trucks since 2012. Wilson Trailer joined as the trailer sponsor in 2012, with Puklich Chevrolet of Bismarck and Ryan Chevrolet of Minot providing pickups.

Twenty Chevy auto dealerships in the Red River Valley have also assisted as truck sponsors.

There are also hundreds of sponsors providing \$5 to over \$100,000 in services and funding for Farm Rescue. The Farm Rescue board of directors, president and volunteers do not receive monetary compensation.

For everyone involved, the work and sacrifice has been worth the joy that comes from helping others.

To volunteer for Farm Rescue, Carol encourages those interested to go online to farmrescue.org to fill out a volunteer form application, or call 701-252-2017.

“We’re always looking for qualified volunteers that are experienced in running the large, newer equipment and having their Commercial Driver’s License is very helpful,” she said.

She also encourages everyone to “never be too proud to ask for help.”

“This kind of situation can happen to anyone,” Carol said. “Don’t hesitate to ask for help from Farm Rescue. It is why we are here.”

To learn more, visit farmrescue.org or call 701-252-2017.

John and Sheree Dubbels in Rochester, Minn. Submitted photo.