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Change Agent

Bill Gross helps farm families in need through Farm Rescue

Nonprofit Farm Rescue plants and harvests crops free of charge for farmers who have been touched by illness, injury, or a natural disaster.



'We are helping to make it more likely for future generations of family farms to be able to continue,' says Bill Gross, founder of Farm Rescue. 'That is what I actually find the most satisfying.'
(Courtesy of Farm Rescue)

By David Karas, Correspondent
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For most of his life, Bill Gross has had the desire to give back and help others.

And by returning to his own roots on a North Dakota farm, the commercial pilot has found a way to give back by helping others develop roots of their own.

In 2005, Mr. Gross founded Farm Rescue, a nonprofit organization that plants and harvests crops free of charge for farmers who have been touched by illness, injury, or a natural disaster – an effort to help family farmers “bridge” crises so that they may continue to operate their farm through a hardship.

“The best thing about Farm Rescue is that it has created an avenue for people and businesses to help farm families in rural communities,” Mr. Gross says. “Often times, the people out in the rural areas are forgotten about.”

Farm Rescue provides assistance to farm families in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and eastern Montana, and has helped more than 250 families in crisis since its founding.

According to the organization’s mission statement, “One of the biggest financial drains on a family is an unexpected medical injury or illness and, of course, a natural disaster. It is even more pronounced on a farm where a family’s livelihood depends on the ability to plant or harvest a crop.”

With this in mind, Gross says, Farm Rescue organizes volunteers and secures donated equipment to provide a safety net, of sorts, for families in crisis to help provide planting and harvesting services in their time of need. While the families provide the seed, fertilizer, fuel, and other inputs and supplies, Farm Rescue provides the equipment and manpower for their volunteers to get the job done.

“A lot of people throw money at things these days,” Gross says. “We actually come and do the work.”

He continues, “We provide the equipment and manpower, and we get it done for them ... we are basically a big, mobile farming operation.”

Gross said the organization has been incredibly fortunate to benefit from the work of some 700 volunteers hailing from all across the country, not to mention generous support from businesses and equipment companies that help supply the trucks, tractors, and tools necessary to get the work done.

Farmers can apply directly to Farm Rescue, but Gross says in about half of the cases, farmers are anonymously referred to the organization through friends or neighbors. The same farm is not typically supported more than once, he says, though farmers could apply once every three years if a new situation arises.

In a recent interview, Gross recalled one of the organization’s beneficiaries – a farm family who were unable to tend to their land as their two children received medical treatment at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. Farm Rescue stepped up to the plate to pitch in and keep the farm running, in the hopes that it could continue to be a viable operation for the family in the long run.

“There is no such thing as sick leave or a family leave of absence,” Gross says about the agriculture industry, specifically family farmers. “A lot of them don’t even have medical insurance. They do not have any of those backups for protection.”

The idea behind Farm Rescue was developed over a period of seven years, Gross says. A commercial pilot for some 20 years – now flying for UPS – Gross has tried to stay involved in helping others throughout his life. Whether it was traveling to Romania to volunteer in orphanages or participating in mission trips to Croatia or Yugoslavia, he spent his share of time giving back.

But that got him to thinking whether there was a way to help back home.

“My heart never left the farming community,” he says. “I always loved farming; that was how I was brought up.”

Gross was raised on a multigenerational family farm in Cleveland, N.D., though for financial reasons his family was not able to keep it running.

“I came from a family farm and was not able to stay on that farm for financial reasons,” he says. “Anytime that a farm family has a crisis, that affects them financially.”

It wasn't long before he realized that he could use his time and talents, as well as his love and appreciation for the farming community, to provide an extra boost to try to help families stay on their farms.

“This is my mission,” he says. “My mission field will be in the fields of the farm families.”

Despite a busy work schedule involving frequent travel overseas, Gross says that the time he puts into Farm Rescue as its president provides him a great sense of happiness and satisfaction.

“We are helping to make it more likely for future generations of family farms to be able to continue,” he says. “That is what I actually find the most satisfying.”

• *For more information or to support Farm Rescue, visit <http://farmrescue.org>.*

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