

ONIDA WATCHMAN

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Organization comes to the rescue of local farm families

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Two local farmers have recently received a helping hand in harvesting their fall crops, following serious injuries. Marty Finley and Ernie Steffen both had crops harvested by the North Dakota-based organization known as Farm Rescue.

Six years ago, Bill Gross founded Farm Rescue, a 'first-of-its-kind' nonprofit organization that plants and harvests crops free of charge for farm families who've experienced a major illness, injury, or natural disaster.

"This has created an avenue for people and businesses to come help families in our region, in rural communities... I see this as making it more likely for future generations to continue farming," said Gross. "This is not a hand-out. We're just helping family farmers who've had a run of bad luck."

Having grown up on a farm, Gross decided to start an organization to help farmers because there are not many programs out there to help them. Because of that and the fact that family-run farms are getting to be few and far between and the fact that farm kids are being forced to get jobs off the farm, it becomes more difficult for farmers to rely on neighbors during a time of need because they're all so spread out.

"I knew there would be people like myself out there...my heart never left the farm," he said. "I knew there would be people who would want to give back."

Farm Rescue is a volunteer-run organization with only two employees running the office out of Jamestown, ND. Gross himself is a full time pilot for UPS, flying Boeing 747s all over the world.

"We have a small army of volunteers from all over the nation," Gross said.

Each year, the number of volunteers has grown. This year, there were volunteers from 15 different states represented during planting and harvest season and they now have a data base of over 1000 volunteers. However, they typically only mobilize about 100-150 people per season. Gross said that several volunteers have come back year after year and are now called team leaders.

The organization is run through donations from their over 300 sponsors, and receives some funds through grants. They cover North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and eastern Montana. The largest sponsor is RDO Equipment Company who provides millions of dollars of John Deere equipment each year.

There is no other organization in the country



Photos by Farm Rescue

FARM RESCUE unloads soybeans into a truck near Onida for Ernie Steffen with one of their John Deere combines. Farm Rescue also helped Marty Finley with his wheat harvest here.

that does this, according to Gross, who says he has done research to try and locate any other such organization.

To apply for assistance from Farm Rescue, farmers must send in an application and a board of directors chooses from among those applications. According to Gross, about 50 percent apply directly while the other half are referred by friends or neighbors. Typically, they will work about 1000 acres of cropland.

"People's reactions are generally very, very thankful," Gross said. He went on to say that Farm Rescue has, essentially, grown into a large family with volunteers and farm-

ers keeping in touch long after Farm Rescue has left. "Really, we're just growing a big family."

Every year, Farm Rescue hosts a banquet for the families that have been helped and for the volunteers. Gross said that people they helped five years ago are planning to be in attendance this year.

Marty Finley, from west of Onida, plans to attend the banquet this Friday. He was in an ATV accident this spring that left him unable to do his own harvesting this year. Farm Rescue harvested his wheat for him.

"It's gotten to be too big of a geographical area for me to get to all of the sites," Gross said. Yet, he's still

involved by teaching new volunteers and getting out to the ones he can. And he reaches out to the individuals who are being helped as often as he can.

On Friday, Gross was traveling through Minneapolis where Ernie Steffen is staying at in a hospital, recovering from major burns he received earlier this year. Gross stopped in to see him that day, doctors had just brought him out of an induced coma. According to Gross, Steffen was sitting up in bed and talking to visitors. "He's recovering, but has a long road to being fully recovered."

Farm Rescue harvested Steffen's soybean crop for him this fall.