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Farm Rescue brings its own equipment and volunteers to the farm. Kurt Kramin accidentally combined photos of their work in his field to create this panorama.

Bridging disasters for farm families

Farm Rescue Kurt Kramin

By Susan Williams
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It takes less than a second to recognize how zealous Bill Gross is about helping family farms.

The youngest of five kids who grew up on a farm near Cleveland, N.D., Gross, 45, left the farm and became a pilot. None of the children in the family were able to stay on the farm because of finances.

Now a Boeing 747 captain for UPS, one of the largest airlines and the largest transportation company in the world, Gross started Farm Rescue in 2005. In a conversation with fellow cockpit members as they flew over the Pacific Rim, Gross talked about buying a big John Deere when he retired and helping farmers from one end of the state to the other. A strategic push from an old college friend, now a U.S. Army chaplain, moved that idea into the here and now.

Gross had flown some mission trips to Romania and Croatia, but kept thinking about what he might be able to do in North Dakota.

"I always thought about the farmers down below," said Gross while flying. "There must be something I can do back home that would help."

He came up with the idea to help farm families in crisis and during dinner his chaplain friend set him on his current path by asking "Why wait?"

"There are fewer family farms and less children (on those farms) and it's harder for neighbors to help one another when there's a major problem," said Gross.

He searched the internet, found farmrescue.org still available, grabbed the name and began the quest as a 501(c)3 to help farm families.

A handful of sponsors and his own money went into the operation the first year. They ended up planting crops for 10 families.

"It snowballed from there and we added harvesting, then South Dakota and then Minnesota," Gross said.

The organization now has nearly 300 sponsors and funds also come in via grants and donations. RDO Equipment Company out of Fargo supplies all the John Deere equipment used in the operations. Another large contributor is Bremer Bank; their foundation contributed \$75,000 last year.



Submitted photos

Bill Gross, captain of a 747 for UPS, wanted to do something for farm families, so he started Farm Rescue which has now branched out to three states.

Except for the two office workers who schedule volunteers and coordinate other aspects of the operation, no one gets paid, including the board of directors. Lodging and a small per diem for food is given to the volunteers who often end up staying overnight on location. The rest of the funding goes towards fuel, insurance and the office expense.

Farmers do not receive money. They get help with planting and/or harvesting and must qualify financially for assistance. Applications are submitted on line and are confidential. Every applicant is personally visited by one of the board members.

"Our mission is to help farm families with a major injury, illness or natural disaster," said Gross, who added those they help usually farm around 1,000 acres or less. "We make sure it's not some multi-millionaire who doesn't need help."

About half of those Farm Rescue helps come via referrals, the rest are self-referred. Gross vividly recalls the first family Farm Rescue helped. It was April 11, 2006. A 32-year-old farmer with a wife and kids had lost his right arm in a grain auger.

"All kinds of cases we help. Every kind of farm accident you can imagine," said Gross. "Small to medium, but not over 3,000 acres. We don't do every acre, but we do a good chunk."

In the case of natural disasters, their help usually goes to farms where there was no insurance.

And because of IRS rules,

Farm Rescue is not allowed to help in a situation where a farmer has died. The benefit of planting or harvesting can only go to a living person, not even their dependents.

It's Farm Rescue's sixth year of operation and there are now three spring planting teams for wheat and soybeans. There are normally two harvest teams. Producers must supply or arrange for their own trucks for hauling crops. Only soybeans and wheat are harvested, not corn, said Gross, because there are so many variations in row widths on corn.

Volunteers to date have come from 15 states including New York. To date, those volunteers have helped 160 farm families in crisis.

"Usually volunteers work just a couple weeks," said Gross. "Some have farming experience, some don't. What I really like about Farm Rescue is everyone likes what they're doing."

No matter the skill set, all are put to work in varying jobs.

And that includes Gross who was at Kurt Kramin's farm south of Renville and ran the combine on the soybean harvest. Gross uses all of his vacation time from UPS to help with spring planting. This year his team planted 11 farms. Coupled with all the promotion work he does for Farm Rescue, Gross estimates he puts in 1,000 hours a year.

Summarized Gross who has put his belief in being a random good Samaritan into practice, "I have a strong passion for it."

By Susan Williams
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As most can tell you, it's the rare farmer who talks about himself, but after Farm Rescue said they were going to harvest his soybeans, Kurt Kramin was more than willing to not only talk about their work but what happened to him.

The injury:

After the big storm in early July, Kramin cleared brush on his farm south of Renville. When he set the brush on fire, the gasoline fumes drifted and ignited, producing third degree burns from his fingertips to his shirt on his right arm. The upward draft of the ignition caused second degree burns on the right side of his face, first degree on the left. He also suffered first degree burns on his left arm, from fingertips to shirt sleeve.

"It took a second to eliminate my mustache," Kramin said. "I wasn't in the flames. The fumes floated. I know it could have been so much worse."

It was July 13. Kramin was transported by ambulance to Regions Hospital in St. Paul, a regional burn center, where he spent the next eight days.

"At first, nobody knew how bad I was hurt or how long it would take," Kramin said.

He had skin grafts to three fingers on his right hand and when he came out of anesthesia, Kramin said his face looked really well. In fact, his face healed completely in seven or eight days. The medical team figured it was a reaction to the anesthesia.

At present, except for his index finger on his right hand, his fingers are really close to 100 percent healed but, Kramin said, he will still have

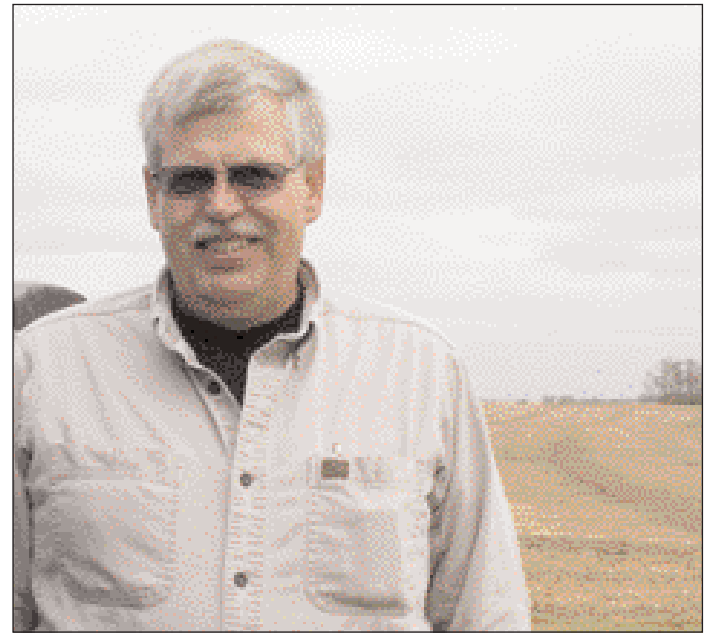


Photo by Susan Williams

Kurt Kramin, Renville, stands in front of the field Farm Rescue harvested Oct. 6 and 7. The volunteers did all Kurt's soybeans – 234 acres – and wouldn't allow him to help.

to wear a compression glove and sleeve for another six to nine months. He must apply lotion several times a day and he has to do finger stretching exercises because the natural reaction is for the skin to contract.

The call:

While he was still in the hospital recovering from the skin grafts, he got a call.

"It was Bill," said Kramin, referring to Bill Gross, founder and president of Farm Rescue.

"I had heard of (Farm Rescue) for a long time already in western North Dakota where they're located," said Kramin. "I was really medicated and told Gross I was sure I could find someone to take the beans out. He said, 'No. We're coming to take your beans.'"

His sister Kara in Valley City, N.D. had asked for prayers for her brother at her church. Her pastor just happened to be on the board of

directors at Farm Rescue.

The volunteers and combine arrived Fri., Oct. 7. In the next two days they proceeded to harvest all of Kramin's 238 acres of soybeans.

Besides Gross, volunteers included Dave Sette, a heavy machine operator from Grafton, Wisc., Gene Spichke and Charles Bartsch from Minot and Pete von Vank from Washburn, N.D. Gross ran the combine.

"They didn't want me doing anything," said Gross. "They said, 'you stand on the side and watch.' I was in the combine for one round."

While Kramin said there isn't much to celebrate about the harvest – "the beans are bad, but the corn is worse" – there's still plenty for which he's thankful.

"Ever since I got hurt it's been a continual number of people helping – farmers, friends, family, and what Farm Rescue did was just a continuation of that. I just appreciate