

Close to home

A North Dakota-based program aids a family near its headquarters.

By: **Mikkel Pates**, Agweek



Marlowe Schlecht (right), farms and feeds cattle northwest of Medina, N.D. When he suffered a life-threatening aneurysm in September, his family called on Farm Rescue volunteers, including John W. “Jack” Rutledge (left) of Peachtree City, Ga. Photo taken Oct. 27, 2013, northwest of Medina, N.D. (Forum News Service/Agweek/Mikkel Pates)

MEDINA, N.D. — If not for a small adhesive bandage on the back of his neck, you wouldn’t know that Marlowe Schlecht was in desperate trouble with a brain aneurysm only six weeks ago. It made him one of the latest of 200 farm families helped by Farm Rescue of Jamestown, N.D.

Schlecht, 61, of Medina, N.D., has farmed and raised cattle all his life, about eight miles to the northwest of the small town in the same county as Jamestown. He took over from his father, Gideon, in the early 1980s. He and his son, Brandon, 34, have farmed together since 1997 and started a 1,000-head feedlot last summer.

Apart from a cancer scare in 2006, he’s been largely healthy.

But on Sept. 15 of this year, Schlecht came home from worship at Faith Evangelical Church in Crystal Springs, and things started going wrong.

“I went into the house to change clothes and all of a sudden I got this terrible pain in the back of my neck,” Schlecht says. “My vision blurred and my speech slurred. Terrible head pain.”

His wife, Tammy, and son, Brandon, called an ambulance. Once at the hospital in Bismarck, N.D., neurologists determined the internal bleeding had stopped, but he needed to be airlifted to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

The Minneapolis doctors soon concluded he needed surgery.

A doctor told Marlowe he’d had a past injury to the back of his head and neck. Marlowe couldn’t remember the injury, but the medical team theorized that a blood vessel broke in the back of his neck, clotted and connected to another vessel — until the pressure broke.

“He said it was like a high-pressure line feeding a low-pressure line,” Schlecht says.

The doctors performed a surgery and solved the problem. Permanently.

Calling on Farm Rescue

When Brandon reached out to Farm Rescue, he didn’t have to reach far.

“I thought, ‘How long it is going to be before [Marlowe] gets back on his feet?’” Brandon says. “I thought about all we’d have to do for his therapy sessions. We thought we’d see if we’d qualify for Farm Rescue to help with the crops.”

The family raises mainly soybeans and corn, but put some oats in for straw.

Qualifying wasn't onerous. Farm Rescue only required some Farm Service Agency records to verify that Brandon is a producer. "That was pretty much the extent of it," he says.

The crews came in and took off nearly 400 acres of crops, and finished the evening of Oct. 27, with the help of Farm Rescue volunteers including John "Jack" Rutledge of Peachtree City, Ga., and Kenneth Chyle, Bowling Green, Ky. When Farm Rescue crew came to his farm, Marlowe was driving around the fields. He wasn't supposed to do much work because he was limited to lifting no more than 15 pounds.

"A guy can't say enough about how that relieves a person's mind," Marlowe says. "To know that someone is there to take care of you, and you don't have to worry about it."

This year's soybean crop looked thin. The Schlechts hadn't gotten any rain since mid-June and didn't have any more until late August. The beans yielded in the low 20s. About 400 acres were harvested by Farm Rescue. The corn went into silage.

"We had planted some corn for grain but it didn't look that good and we just chopped it," Marlowe says.

The relief was a big deal to Brandon.

"I'm not caught up, but having the soybeans out of the way is a big help," he says. "We've still got work to do — cattle to work and hay to haul."

Marlowe is grateful to Farm Rescue, which he considers an instrument of prayer. He says when he was in the hospital, his name was on prayer chains in Minnesota, South Dakota, Indiana and North Dakota.

"As soon as the word got out to (my) church, people got to the church and ... (pauses) had prayer for me, and I know that's the reason I'm here."

Bringing it home

The Schlecht case is the closest to "home" so far for Farm Rescue cases since the company's founder, Bill Gross, started helping people in 2006. Marlowe says he's known some of the Gross family for many years, and there are lots of ties in the region.

He was the youngest of five children of John and Lorraine Gross. His mother was from the Streeter, N.D., area, south of Medina. His father, a World War II veteran, survived the financial struggles of the 1980s, but had to sell nearly all of a large Hereford cattle herd and half of his land. None of the children stayed on the farm.

Gross went to Cleveland High School until it closed and then finished high school at home. He borrowed some money from Joe Anderson, founder and owner of Haybuster Manufacturing in Jamestown, and went to the University of North Dakota, where he got a degree in business administration. After working for UPS for several years, Gross started Farm Rescue in 2005.

Gross wasn't able to be at the Schlecht case, personally, but was in touch by phone from his flight berths around the world.

He says personal experience drove his commitment to helping people whose lives had been affected by the dangers of farming. A hired man on the farm where he grew up died in a power take-off accident. Gross also had an uncle who died when he suffered a heart attack while driving a farm tractor and plunged over a drop-off into a slough.

"I was no stranger to accidents down on the farm," Gross says.