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A harvest of hope

Growing nonprofit helps get crops planted

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ALCESTER - Regan Homandberg dug a boot tip into the dung-colored earth, kicked up a stalk from last season's corn crop and, as he looked up, a smile spread across his sun-creased face.

There, on 70 acres of his great-grandfather's farmland, was a brand-new John Deere 9520 tractor towing a new 1890 planter - the entire rig worth \$500,000, easy - that dropped soybean seed into the no-tilled field.

"It's a heck of a thing," Homandberg said. "Just a heck of a thing."

In January, Homandberg was in a car accident. He was thrown from the vehicle. Broke his right shoulder, right knee and every rib. Two titanium rods and 10 screws keep his back stable.

As the only one of Elmer Homandberg's children still farming, he said he worried who would work the land. Until he saw a story about Farm Rescue, a nonprofit that helps small- to mid-size farm families who have come under hardship from illness, injury or natural disaster, and applied.

On Monday, volunteers sowed his soybeans.

"It's amazing they've got the time to come out and help us, but they do," Homandberg said. "It's tough to be a family farmer, tough to hang onto that family farm. But it's worth it - this makes it worthwhile, to keep on going."



Elmer Homandberg (left) and his son, Regan, talk about planting Monday on the Homandberg farm near Alcester. (Lara Neel / Argus Leader)

Farm rescue planting locations in South Dakota



Expanding its reach

Since 2005, Farm Rescue has provided planting and harvesting help to families in North and South Dakota, eastern Montana and western Minnesota, usually on farms with 500 to 1,000 acres. In 2006, Farm Rescue helped 10 families; in 2007, the number grew to 21, and 36 families were helped last year.

"I thought, 'How can I do something where I grew up?' " said Farm Rescue founder/president Bill Gross, a UPS pilot who grew up on a cattle ranch 80 miles east of Bismarck, N.D., and saw the need to help others while on mission trips to Romania and Croatia in 2001. "I decided that after I retired, I'd

get a tractor and be a Good Samaritan, do it all myself. Just drive around and find farmers in need. Then I was told I needed to think bigger. We're a formal nonprofit. We bring people and equipment out here to help people who can't do for themselves."

Because of springtime flooding, Farm Rescue will help 21 farmers get their crops in this year, then help another 15 families harvest come fall.

But as donations grow, Gross said, the geographic reach will expand. Farm Rescue has more than 100 sponsors, including major contributors Wal-Mart, RDO Equipment Co., First Premier Bank, South Dakota Wheat Growers and Lamar Signs.

Variety of volunteers

Wal-Mart gave Farm Rescue \$50,000 last year; RDO Equipment donated the two John Deere rigs, one of which is working in North Dakota along Interstate 94, the other roughly following Interstate 29 to aid farmers in South Dakota, Minnesota and North Dakota.

"After (Monday), we'll be running the equipment 24 hours a day, from (Alcester) all the way up to Grand Forks," Gross said. "We've got people coming to help from Texas, South Carolina, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, you name it. Just to help some family farmer in a time of crisis."

The organization has more than 1,000 volunteers in its database, everyone from retired farmers and women who embroider blankets the organization sells to videographers and fellow pilots.

"These guys have nice, new equipment, better than my old man has, so I told Bill I'd come drive for him," said Chad Hansen, an Alaska-based UPS pilot who grew up on a farm in Montana. "Seriously, it's nice to give back, because that's the way the world should work. And in times like these, it's better to give than to take."

'A big help to us'

"It looks great, it looks really good," Elmer Homandberg said, stretching his green and gold John Deere suspenders as he watched the 9520 kick up dust. "It's nice to see that there are still people in the world that want to help. I grew up in a time where we'd used to have planting bees. You'd get 25-30 neighbors together and just do all the planting. Made you feel good, being able to help."

"That's part of it," Gross said. "There's just a lot fewer family farms, a lot less of a chance where the farmer can turn to a neighbor in a time of crisis."

Near Alcester, Farm Rescue also helped the McKee family, Paul and his son, Scott, plant their soybeans.

"Scott's been fighting pancreatitis. He was out most the whole season a couple of years ago, and it's kind of come back on him," said his mom, Shirley. "Then, he got rear-ended and hurt his back, back in March, I guess. It's been pretty rough on him."

Farm Rescue was able to plant 160 to 200 acres of beans for the McKees, Gross said.

"It's sure going to be a big help to us," Shirley McKee said.

From Union County, the Farm Rescue rig will head north to Howard, Brookings, Clear Lake and Bristol before entering Minnesota and ending up in North Dakota.

People can keep up with Farm Rescue's progress at www.farmrescue.org. An interactive map will feature video from each family helped by Farm Rescue.

"People will be able to watch just what we're doing," said Gross, who takes a month's vacation each spring to oversee Farm Rescue's planting operation and receives no compensation. "People already watch "Deadliest Catch," Hulk Hogan, why not this? If it extends our reach, the mission, so be it. It's all about expanding this to everyone who needs help across the Midwest."

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Additional Facts

More

To apply for help, donate or become a sponsor or volunteer, visit Farm Rescue at www.farmrescue.org.
