

A friend in need

Farm Rescue helps Sandvik get seed in the ground after his heart attack

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Photo by Elizabeth Hackenburg Farm Rescue volunteer Charles Bartsch, left, talks with Jason Sandvik Thursday, when the non-profit planted 800 acres of durum wheat on Sandvik's farm.

Photo by Elizabeth Hackenburg Charles Bartsch, a volunteer with Farm Rescue, watches as durum wheat seed transfers to a tractor Thursday at Williston-area farmer Jason Sandvik's farm.

WILLISTON — Jason Sandvik pulled into his field on a warm, windy afternoon last week in an old farm truck filled with seeds, ready to help transfer the load to a waiting tractor.

The day's activities seemed routine for any local farmer this time of year, but until very recently, Sandvik

didn't think he'd be growing a crop at all this summer. The 44-year-old Williams County native suffered a heart attack three weeks ago while preparing his land for planting, and wound up undergoing surgery, followed by a week-long hospital stay. The sudden illness made seeding his fields seem nearly impossible until a neighbor's suggestion led to much-needed help from a regional non-profit that extends a hand to farmers in need. Last week, volunteers from Farm Rescue planted Sandvik's 800 acres with durum wheat, a crop his family has grown on the plot northwest of Williston for the past quarter of a century. Sandvik usually plants alone, getting the job done in about two weeks. But this year, a broken foot and a struggle to adapt to diabetes-related partial vision loss, along with the heart attack, made for a tough season. "It means the world to me," Sandvik said, standing in the sun across from the small farmhouse that he grew up in. "I don't know how I would have been able to get it done this spring without help. I really did not know what would happen." He is one of hundreds who've been helped out over the past decade by volunteers from Farm Rescue. The group, based in Cass County, offers a hand to farmers who are facing the possibility of a barren year due to illness, injury or a natural disaster. The manpower it is able to supply can mean the difference between drained bank accounts and pulling in income that families are depending on, said Tanner Millang, a farmer from Bottineau who serves as Farm Rescue's field operations manager. "As a farmer you're putting so much on the line, you're basing your investments on 6 inches of topsoil and the hope that it rains. If you miss one year you could go bankrupt," he said. The network of volunteers spreads to eastern Montana, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and North Dakota, where the group seems to invariably meet with a warm reception, and even teamwork. "North Dakota is a great state, especially the farmers," Millang said, adding that it's not uncommon for neighbors to jump in and help Farm Rescue workers. So far this year, nearly 20 applicants across the region have been granted aid. Sandvik found out late last month that he was on the approved list. Then, about a week later, Charles Bartsch, a retired farmer from Minot, and Clay Robertson, a NASA engineer from Tennessee, who uses his vacation time to volunteer with Farm Rescue, arrived. With the help of huge pieces of donated equipment, the two men had Sandvik's wheat in the ground in less than three days. Robertson, who grew up on a farm, said he's happy spending his free time helping those who make a living from the land. "This makes me feel like I'm doing something that's worthwhile," he said. Margaret Sandvik, Jason Sandvik's mother, has lived on the farm for more than four decades. When her husband died six years ago, Jason moved back home to work fields that were claimed by the Norwegian family's immigrant relatives in the early 1900s. On the final day of planting, Margaret made sure to have lunch ready for Bartsch and Robertson, whose efforts nearly brought her to tears. "Amazing," she said.