FARMING WITH A PHYSICAL HANDICAP

Agriculture is a hazardous occupation. Deaths per 100,000 farm workers are consistently "high". In 1986, there were approximately 1,600 agriculture-related fatalities.

While these statistics seem grim, the greatest impact on agriculture, rural communities and the rural economy comes from the 170,000 disabling farm injuries. Nearly half of all survivors of serious farm accidents are permanently impaired.

But a farmer doesn't have to retire after a serious temporary or permanent physical disability. There are thousands of farmers with disabilities throughout the United States and Canada that prove this fact. These farmers are being recognized for their successes by many states across the nation.

In 1979, a farmer with a disability contacted Purdue (Indiana) University's Department of Agricultural Engineering to request information on hand controls for a farm tractor. Since that time, Purdue's Breaking New Ground program for farmers with disabilities has exceeded all expectations and spread to other states and counties. Similar programs exist in Iowa, Vermont, North Dakota and Montana. Illinois will be next to join in.

In 1986, Purdue's Breaking New Ground Resource Center[1] completed a mail survey of 500 farm operators with unknown physical handicaps who had used their service. Table 1 shows the distribution of responding farmers by type of handicap.

The key point of Table 1 is not the number farmers with a particular disability, but that the farmers have remained actively involved in their farm business after a serious physical disability

These farmers have been able to do this by taking advantage of some ingenious modifications and accessories manufactured to increase the accessibility of farms and farm equipment.

Hand controls, for example, can be installed on just about any make or brand of combine and tractor. Wheelchair and/or operator chair lifts can be attached to the tractor or combine if climbing steps is a barrier. With these modifications, an individual with limited use of his lower limbs or no lower limbs can operate tractors and similar farm equipment efficiently and safely.

All-terrain vehicles (ATVs) also increase the mobility and activity of a farmer with a disability. Attachments are available to help the farmer do actual field work or access different areas of the farm.

A radio or some form of communication installed in the tractors and combines of a farmer with a disability can be used to call for help, should the situation arise, or as a tool for labor management.

The farmer's shop, farm buildings and barns can be made accessible by installing ramps or removing existing barriers.

Still, certain areas of the farm will be inaccessible and it is not feasible to make them accessible. In such situations, arrangements can be made to have the task completed by someone else.

Farming is challenging, but it need not be impossible. For more information about farming with a disability, contact John Hancock, Department of Agricultural Engineering, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40546-0276, phone (606) 257-3000, ext. 106.

by John Hancock

Table 1 — Distribution of Farmers by Type of Handicap

Handicap	Number of Farmers
Paraplegic	68
Upper limb amputee	29
Quadriplegic	23
Lower limb amputee	18
Musculoskeletal	14
Neurological	14
Lower leg impairment	9
Respiratory	6
Vision	5
Polio	5
Hearing	4
Back Problems	4
Muscular Dystrophy	3
Cardiovascular	2
More than 1 handicap	28

[1]Wilkinson, T.L. *Evaluation of Self-Propelled Agricultural Machines Modified for Operators with Serious Physical Handicaps.* Masters Dissertation, Purdue University, December 1987.