

Comments to USDA-CSREES on behalf of ASHCA

October 17, 2008

Agriculture ranks as one of America's most hazardous industries. In an average year, 580 adults die while doing farm work and 130 children lose their lives to an agriculture-related incident.^{1,2} Each day on farms across our country, about 250 workers suffer lost-time injuries and 71 children are seriously injured.^{1,3} Agriculture, due to its decentralized nature and diverse structure, lags behind other industries in reducing the toll on its workers with a fatality rate eight times the all-industry average.

The Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America was established to pursue a national strategy for achieving a hazard-free work environment for American agriculture.⁴ The Council is comprised of agricultural producer groups and organizations, agribusinesses, and academic and public health institutions.

ASHCA's mission is "to proactively address ongoing and emerging occupational safety and health issues affecting U.S. agriculture." A guiding principle of ASHCA is the belief that a hazard-free and healthy agricultural workforce contributes to increased productivity and decreased costs, leading to improved standing in the global market. ASHCA believes the agricultural industry has a responsibility to help facilitate the adoption of best management practices that reduce injuries and deaths on our nation's farms and ranches.

Section 7410 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Pub .L. No. 110-234) is making available in fiscal year (FY) 2009 \$18 million to fund a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP). The BFRDP will make competitive grants to new and established local and regional training, education, outreach, and technical assistance initiatives that address the needs of beginning farmers and ranchers. While several important topics that address the needs of beginning farmers have been identified, including *Risk Management Education*, ASHCA suggests you specifically include Work Safety and Health as a topic.

Typically, within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Cooperative States Research, Education/Extension Service (CSREES), the term *Risk Management Education* is used to reference economic risks, marketing strategies, crop insurance, crop diversity, disaster preparedness, labor shortages, and the like.⁵ Without a specific mention of worker safety and health, work injury issues are overlooked as a topic of interest in requests for proposals. Ideally, the inclusion of safety and health would be an allowable component of a BFRDP grant proposal.

Injury data suggest beginning farmers and ranchers have several characteristics (e.g., smaller acreage, older machines,) associated with a higher rate of injury. Some beginning farmers are also parents of young children, requiring safety measures above and beyond expectations for adult workers. Even conservative estimates of the cost of farm related fatalities, injuries, and disease suggests that the agricultural safety and health problem is a \$5 billion issue.⁶ Losses of this scale reduce our economic competitiveness in a global economy. Investments in safety and health have a proven return on investment.

ASHCA firmly believes that agricultural work safety and health is an important issue that needs increased attention in CSREES programs such as the BFRDP. Specifically including Work Safety and Health as a grant project component is one way to help bring this about. Thank you for this opportunity to share our view about this important issue.

References

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