

Mosinee farmer tells his story of perseverance

It has been a little more than six years since Ron Kusiak fell from a tree stand while bear hunting and ended up as a paraplegic.

Kusiak, 54, told his story of perseverance to members of the AgrAbility of Wisconsin Advisory Council Nov. 6 during the council’s annual meeting. Kusiak, who suffered a spinal cord injury in the 2007 accident, has been able to continue farming with the help of the services provided by the AgrAbility program.

AgrAbility is a grant-funded program that is a partnership between Easter Seals Wisconsin and UW-Extension. The program provides services and adaptive equipment to farmers with injuries who want to continue farming and living independently.

Kusiak said he learned about the services while lying in a hospital bed recuperating from his injuries.

Kusiak’s 56-head Holstein herd was sold before he returned home from the hospital, but that didn’t mean he wanted to give up on his farming career altogether.

“I always liked farming,” Kusiak said. “We have beef now. Because of (AgrAbility’s) help, I’m able to run the farm pretty decently by myself. I’m not all the way there being self-sufficient, but I’m very close in a lot of ways.”

The program helped Kusiak purchase a Polaris Ranger all-terrain vehicle that he can use to move around his farm, and equipped it with hand controls for gas and brake pedals.

Other accommodations on the farm have included power lifts to help him get in and out of the Ranger and a tractor; front and rear cameras on his tractor; a device on his tractor to make changing attachments easier; drive-through gates; and automatic hitches on various farm machines.

“It’s essentially getting back to being fun again,” Kusiak said. “Before (these accommodations) I just moped around a lot and tried to figure out what I could still do while being goofed up.”

Jeff Kratochwill, an Easter Seals staff member who helped Kusiak develop a plan that would allow him to continue farming, said he is proud of what Kusiak has overcome.

“I’m proud of what he’s able to do now and the adjustments he’s made,” Kratochwill said.

Kusiak currently feeds out about 50 dairy steers on his 538-acre farm near Mosinee. He grows crops on about 200 tillable acres.

“I was never a person to just lie down and die,” Kusiak said. “I’m very proud of you guys for helping me out and getting me this far. It’s all because of your planning that actually got me to where I am today.”

“The equipment gives me so much I can do now. I was so limited before. If it wouldn’t have been for (AgrAbility), I’m sure I would have lost the farm by now. But we ain’t doing too bad.”

Kusiak is one of many farmers the AgrAbility program has



helped since its inception in 1991. Although there are more than 20 AgrAbility programs in states across the country, more than 40 percent of the clients served nationally during the past year were in Wisconsin.

“We have a very active and productive program here, and it is really a tribute to the staff that runs the program on a day-to-day basis,” said Richard Straub, Wisconsin

AgrAbility project director.

About half of the farmers helped by the program in the past year were dairy farmers, Straub said, but farmers with other livestock and crops were also on the receiving end of AgrAbility services.

About 62 percent of the clients helped during the past year had chronic conditions such as arthritis

or bad hips or backs, Straub said, while about 15 percent had suffered injuries on the farm.

The program will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2015 and Straub quizzed council members on what should be done to commemorate the occasion.

“The 25-year anniversary and our successes are something we should celebrate,” Straub said.

Straub said program organizers are also going to make a pitch to host a national training workshop in 2015 where officials from all the states that have an AgrAbility program come together to share ideas and strategize for the future.

The program recently hired a new outreach specialist — Hannah Gerbitz — who joined the program during a time of funding uncertainty. Since Gerbitz’s arrival the program received notification that it will receive \$180,000 per year in federal funding for the next four years.

The outreach specialist is responsible for grant writing, public education and outreach while the Easter Seals staff makes connections with farmers and helps set up adaptive rehabilitation programs.

Council members encouraged AgrAbility program organizers to reach out to potential financial supporters through newsletters, social media and on the program website.

“We want to make sure our funding base is secure into the future,” Straub said. “The program could benefit from community support.”

Straub said the program could work with the UW-Madison Foundation to accept tax-exempt donations that could be targeted to AgrAbility or the Easter Seals Farm Assessment and Rehabilitation Methods, or FARM, program.

JIM MASSEY, The Country Today



Annual Report

Grant Year 2014- 2015

Client Demographics

AgrAbility of Wisconsin project staff reported serving 580 farmers and ranchers with disabilities during their respective 2014- 2015 Reporting Period (RP). This RP begins with the individual project beginning date of September 1, 2014 and ends on August 31, 2015 for all projects. This brief report includes information for only the AgrAbility of Wisconsin project which is funded by USDA/NIFA. Most of the clients served were employed full time as the owner/operator of the farm or ranch and were male. The three most common primary types of agricultural operations are dairy, livestock, and field/grain operations. The leading primary disabilities

were joint injuries, followed by back injuries, arthritis, amputations, heart disease and orthopedic injuries.

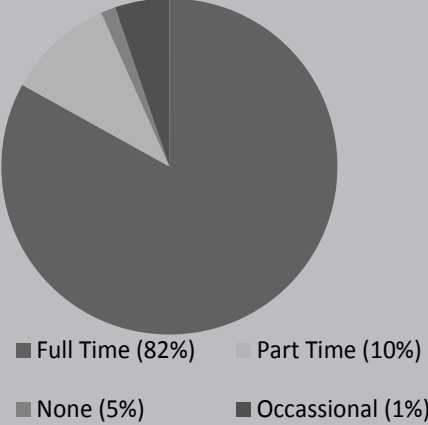
The reporting method for the current RP included data provided by our project using the templates developed by the Wisconsin NAP. It should be noted that the total Percentage reported in tables rarely equals 100 percent due to rounding to the nearest 0.0 decimal place.

Owner/ Operator: 80.7%
Spouse/ Partner: 12.8%
Dependent Adult: 0.7%
Employee: 3.6%
Planning New Ag Career: 0.7%
Other Family Member: 0.7%

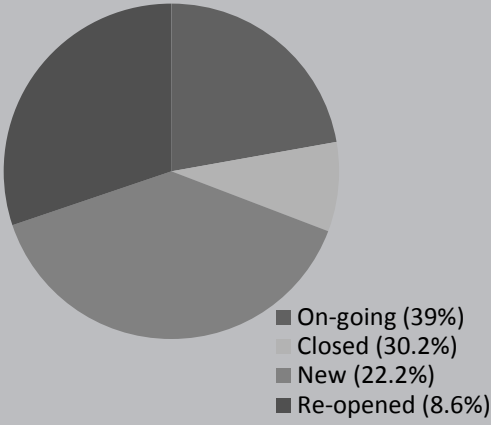
Mean Age: 55.8 years
Age Range: 18-90
Male Clientele: 80.9%
Female Clientele: 19.1%
Past Military Service: 8.6 %
Amish/Mennonite: 0.7%

Caucasian: 93.1%
Native American: 0.5%
African American: 0.2%
Unknown: 3.6%

Work Status



Client Status



AgrAbility of Wisconsin Director:
Richard Straub

AgrAbility of Wisconsin Co-Director:
Brian Luck

FARM Program Director:
Paul Leverenz

Outreach Specialist:
Hannah Barthels

Case Managers:
T Ellenbecker
Paul Untiet

Rural Rehabilitation Specialists:
Jeff Kratochwill
Ami Cooper

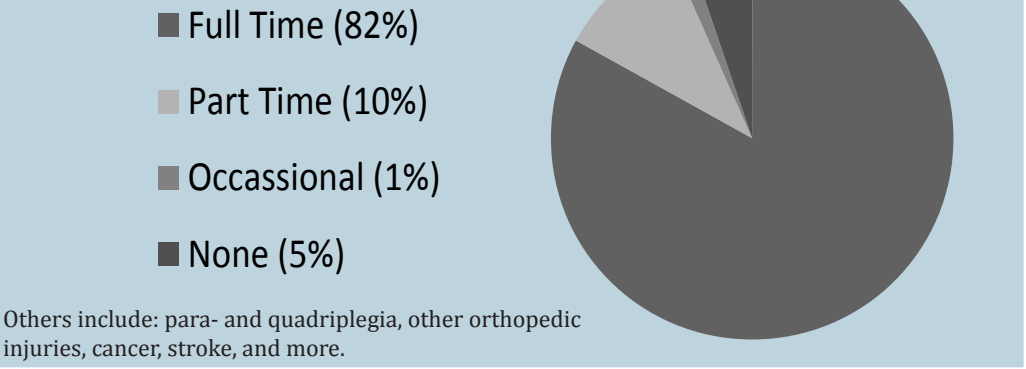
FARM Technical Assistants:
Mebela Brown
Monette Bebow-Reinhard

AgrAbility Program Assistant:
Anna Gries
Abi Jensen

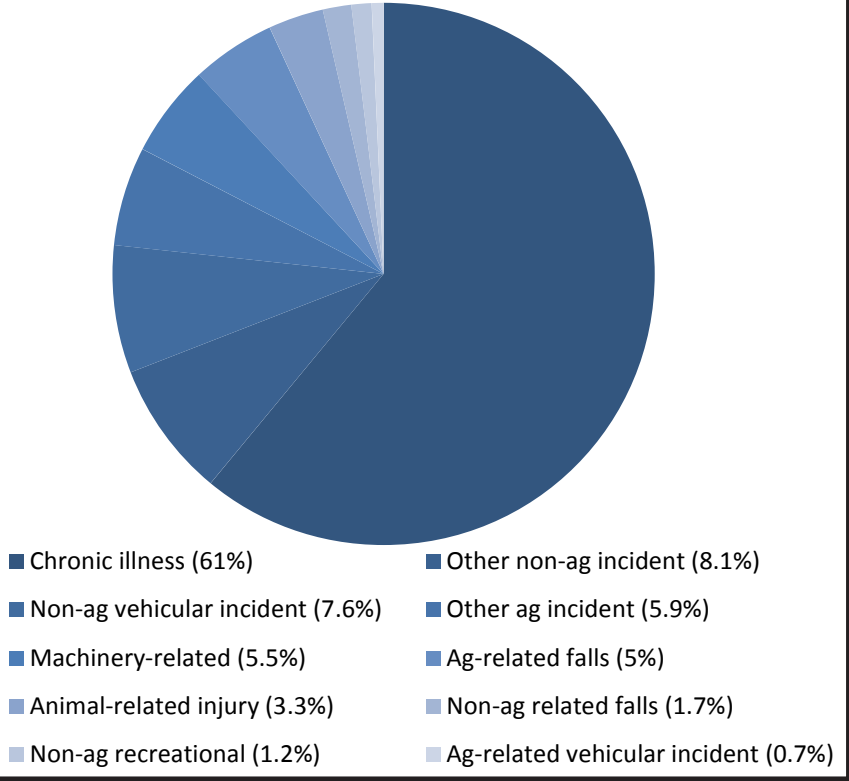
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Primary Disabling Conditions



Origin of Disability



NETWORKING

AAW has maintained a partnership with Easter Seals of Wisconsin to provide on-site farm assessments for clients. AAW recruits farmers and maintains a list of those who agree to let new clients reach out to them to learn about the program from a current or past client. In the upcoming year, this list will be updated to include farmers from all the counties and more contact names.

Neighbor-to-Neighbor meetings are hosted on farms of clients, where individuals have the opportunity to network and share their experiences concerning disabilities and rehabilitation. There are 3-4 meeting each year with an average attendance between 3-15 current, former, and ongoing AAW clients.

First-Reported Agricultural Enterprises

Type of Operation	Percent
Dairy	53.10%
Livestock	23.40%
Field/Grain crops	11%
Other*	6%

*Further others include poultry, swine, vegetables, specialty crops, and more.



Lyle Schlomer, an AgrAbility client, was featured on Wisconsin Public Television's "Around the Farm Table".

Farm & Trade Shows 2014-2015

Indian Summer Festival- Milwaukee, Sept 5-7
Neighbor to Neighbor Meeting: Gary Stankowski: Mosinee, Sept 25
ANRE Conference- WI Dells, Oct 20-22
AgrAbility Advisory Council Meeting: Madison, Nov 6
Dodgeville Kiwanis Club presentation- Dodgeville, Dec 15
La Crosse Farm Show- La Crosse, Jan 14-15
Rock County Ag Showcase- Janesville, Jan 29
Marshfield Mall Farm Show- Marshfield, Feb 18-19
MOSES Organic Farming Conference- La Crosse, Feb 26-28
Eau Claire Farm Show- Eau Claire, Mar 3-5
WI Ag Women's Summit- WI Dells, Mar 13-14
Ginseng Growers Conference- Marathon, Mar 14
AgrAbility of Wisconsin Summit: Marshfield, Mar 16
WPS Farm Show- Oshkosh, Mar 24-26
OTA Western Tech Class Farm Visit: La Crosse, Apr 1
Neighbor to Neighbor Meeting: Tom Murphy: Soldiers Grove, Apr 8
AgrAbility National Training Workshop- Rochester, NY, Apr 13-16
JCEP Conference- Appleton, Apr 28-29
Kewaunee County Rural Safety Day- Kewaunee, May 20
FFA Classroom presentation: Jefferson, Jun 9
WI FFA Convention- Madison, Jun 9-12
Neighbor to Neighbor Meeting: Rick Casey: New Richmond, Jul 1
Skip Ellenbecker Golf Outing- Marathon, Aug 7
Extension Day at State Fair- West Allis, Aug 11
Farm Tech Days- Sun Prairie, Aug 25-27
Brian Luck Outreach Presentations: 23, throughout the state

Media Exposure 2014-2015

AgrAbility of Wisconsin Hires Two New Staff Members
Farm Progress
Hortonville man honored by Easter Seals
Waupaca Now
Luck Hired as Co-Director of AgrAbility of Wisconsin
NFMC, AgrAbility of Wisconsin to Hold Summit in March
Wisconsin Ag Connection
Easter Seals Wisconsin Honors the 2014 "Difference-Makes" at Recognition Dinner
Easter Seals of Wisconsin
Mosinee farmer tells his story of perseverance
New technologies reduce physical strain for farmers
Expert offers tips for avoiding injury
The Country Today
Wisconsin AgrAbility the most active in US
AgrAbility helps farmers stay in business
WI State Farmer
Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities for 23 Years
Spring Growers Meeting
AgrAbility helps Sharon farmer stay in business
Gazetta Extra; The Janesville Gazette
Volunteer digs deep--helping and farming
Programs help farmers with challenges
Farming pain: compensate without compromising
Agri-View

Over the last year, educational activities have included visits to occupational therapy classes and high school FFA classes. AAW educates these students through assistive technology, avoiding secondary injuries, and AAW services. Farmsite visits, PowerPoint and video presentations, case studies, printed resources, and group discussions are used to share information.

EVENTS & ACTIVITIES



The annual summit was held in Marshfield, Wis. during March. With the help of Easter Seals FARM Team, National Farm Medicine Center, and the UW-Extension, the summit was a great success.



While attending the WPS farm show, Pam Jahnke, the Fabulous Farm Babe, interviewed Hannah Barthels, AgrAbility of Wisconsin's Outreach Specialist.