

Farming and disability

9,000 farmers in Northern New England have a disability

By Karen Farber

Farming successfully with disability is the National AgrAbility Project's motto and if there is anyone who can talk the talk and walk the walk of farming in Maine, it is Jane Bell, the coordinator of the project in Maine.

Bell married into the seventh generation of a Washington County farming family. The eighth generation currently operates Tide Mill Organic Farm there. The younger of Bell's two sons, Jesse, has autism and it was because of him that Bell learned about AgrAbility.

Flipping through a tractor magazine one day, Bell ran across an article about AgrAbility, a national project funded through a USDA grant, created to assist people with disabilities employed in agriculture.

AgrAbility staff perform worksite assessments and develop a plan to accommodate the farmer/rancher. Funding for the plan must come from the farmer/rancher or other sources such as state vocational rehabilitation or charitable organizations.

Farming with autism

Bell arranged for Northern New England AgrAbility to visit Tide Mill Organic Farm and take a look at how her son, Jesse, performed his work about the farm and home. Many of visiting occupational therapist's suggestions seem somewhat obvious in retrospect but were very helpful, Bell said.

As a result of the AgrAbility visit, Bell's son now carries a walkie-talkie so he can be in contact with others throughout the day. His list of chores are written down along with the times at which he is to perform them thereby ensuring that the chickens are watered before the heat of the day and the laundry is hung before the sun sets. The task list, kept in a plastic sheath to protect it from the elements, may include helping his uncle in the sawing of wood, keeping the greenhouse's wood furnace fed, and feeding the chickens and pigs. Although Jesse does not have a driver's license,



Frank Lambert has 50 head of cattle at his farm in Corinth. For each head, he needs an acre of hay for winter feeding and an acre of grazing land.

he is able to drive a small tractor and wagon about the farm's property.

With an eye to increasing Jesse's independence, Bell took Jesse's AgrAbility assessment and three quotes for wood splitters to Voc Rehab in hopes of getting funding for the splitter that would help Jesse become more self-sufficient.

At the time of Jesse's assessment, Northern New England AgrAbility was looking for a Maine project coordinator. Bell described it as a kind of a case coordinator role. Bell applied and got the job.

"Sometimes it's the resource connection that farmers need—where to look for funding, grant opportunities," Bell said. Watching Bell work, reveals that it takes more than knowing where the resources are, it takes an understanding of farming.

Nature strikes

When Bell arrived at Frank Lambert's Corinth farm in August, he promptly expressed his sorrow for her loss. In late June, a lightning bolt struck a 45-foot spruce on some ledge on the Bell farm, discharging electricity that killed eight adult Herefords, seven due to calve, and six yearlings. Twelve of the herd survived the storm.

Nature's disaster could just have easily struck Lambert's place. He has a 50-head beef herd. For each one, he grows an acre of hay and needs an acre of grazing land. As Lambert and Bell walked the Corinth farm, they talked of invasive grasses and using a donkey as a coyote alarm system—a donkey is less expensive than a llama, Lambert explained.

In addition to the typical curves farming throws at farmers, Lambert experiences tremors or shaking as the result of medication he takes to control his bipolar disorder.

Over the side, with the wheelbarrow

One of the things Lambert's AgrAbility OT (occupational therapist) assessment identified was the need for a wider, railed, ramp running between the barn and the cattle feedlot. The existing narrow, uneven surface becomes particularly hazardous in the winter, even with salt, and is especially so for Lambert. He admitted that there have been few times when he and the wheelbarrow have gone over the side—a three- to five-foot drop.

Extensions on shovels to relieve shoulder and back strain and a power grease gun for use on farm equipment were also suggested. Through Voc Rehab, Lambert received a grant to help purchase these items that help him



Jesse Bell performs a variety of tasks on the Tide Mill Organic Farm, owned and operated by his family. Left, Bell is wrapping a silage bale, winter food for the cattle. Right, Bell is filling the watering system in a "chicken tractor," a movable pen for pasture-raised organic roasting chickens.

continue farming effectively and safely.

Employed as a diesel mechanic for a number of years, Lambert does vehicle repairs for neighbors and local farmers to help make ends meet. He would like to grow the business to help cover farming expenses. "I can maintain pretty good and I know how it's supposed to be though I can't do the fine stuff anymore. I used to have a full shop but I lost it to fire about three years ago." Today, Lambert has a repair truck full of tools and a slab poured for the replacement garage. He and his wife are currently applying through a variety of sources for funding to rebuild the garage.

Automatic can opener needed

Another of Bell's consumers is Greg Ketting, who lost his arm in an accident. He has a small farm at which he raises pheasants and does some hardwood milling. With a background in raising pigs, Ketting would like to return to that. To assist in pig farming, Bell explained that Ketting is hoping to locate a device that opens feed cans—a task that is complicated by absence of a hand and lower arm.

According to AgrAbility, over 9,000 farm families in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine are



Jane Bell, Maine's AgrAbility project coordinator, left, is working with Frank Lambert to identify financial resources to help him purchase adaptive equipment and continue farming.

limit if not completely prevent is secondary injury. These are a direct result of performing a task with compromised ability but without adaptations, thereby causing another injury.

“Eventually, each farmer gets a disability, even if it's just a bad back from jumping in and out of a tractor for years.”

—Jane Bell, AgrAbility project coordinator in Maine

affected by a disability. According to national statistics, 32 percent of those acquired their disability as the result of a farm-related accident, 24 percent due to an accident unrelated to farming and 44 percent due to other conditions. The traditional family farm operation is highly dependent upon the family working together. Regardless of who acquires the disability, the entire family and farm operation is impacted.

The AgrAbility Project links the Cooperative Extension Service at a land-grant university with a private nonprofit disability service organization. Effective Sept. 1, South Portland-based Alpha One assumed the nonprofit organization role, replacing ATech of New Hampshire.

Together these groups provide practical education and assistance that promotes independence in agricultural production and rural living. The project assists people involved in production agriculture who work both on small and large operations.

Currently, there are 25 AgrAbility projects nationwide that: identify farmers with disabilities and refer them to appropriate resources; provide on-site technical assistance on adapting and using farm equipment and tools, and on modifying farm operations and buildings; provide agriculture-based education to help prevent further injury and disability; help extension educators and other rural professionals upgrade their skills in assisting farmers with disabilities; and develop and coordinate peer support networks.

Jumping in and out of the tractor

"Eventually, each farmer gets a disability, even if it's just a bad back from jumping in and out of a tractor for years. Many have physical impairments that they don't think of as a disability," Bell said. "As people age, there tends to be declining muscle, eyesight, and/or hearing. Eventually, something compromises ability."

One of the things that AgrAbility hopes to

Another common result of not adapting to an initial injury is for a farmer's family member to become injured as the result of say, helping lift the farmer in and out of the tractor because he/she can no longer do it alone.

"A good half of the benefit is connecting farmers to resources, funding, services, and other farmers with disabilities," Bell concluded. ■

Jesse and his mother will share their insights about adaptations Jesse used to successfully farm with autism, this fall during the National AgrAbility Project's Training Workshop, Nov. 7 to 10, in Burlington, Vt. The workshop will offer an array of sessions discussing strategies the farmer, rancher and farmworker can use to continue working in production agriculture.



The medication Frank Lambert takes causes constant tremors that make some farm tasks difficult, such as moving hay from the barn to this feed lot during the winter months.

AgrAbility Stats

According to the national AgrAbility Project, more than 13 million individuals in rural America are affected by disabilities. Nationwide, approximately 288,000 agricultural workers between the ages of 15 and 79 have a disability that affects their ability to perform one or more essential tasks.

Based on 1999 AgrAbility statistics of 1,171 farmers served, the types of disabilities reported by farmers receiving services through AgrAbility included:

- 27 percent other disabling conditions due to head injuries, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, respiratory impairments, visual or hearing impairments, mental illness, mental retardation, burns, chemical sensitivities or chemical dependency;
- 23 percent orthopedic related disabilities;
- 21 percent spinal cord injuries resulting in paraplegia or quadriplegia;
- 16 percent amputations; and
- 13 percent neuromuscular disorders including: multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, polio, cerebral palsy, ALS, Epilepsy, and strokes.

The causes of the disabling conditions included:

- 44 percent non-accident related disabling conditions as described above;
- 32 percent farm-related accidents due to falls, farm machinery/equipment accidents, and livestock related injuries; and
- 24 percent non-farm-related accidents due to: recreational accidents, auto accidents, or falls.