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ABSTRACT

The AgrAbility Project offers education and assistance to farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural workers with physical and mental disabilities. The project also eliminates barriers and creates a favorable climate among rural service providers for people with disabilities. Disabilities and conditions covered are listed. Examples of the project's benefits include new or modified equipment for a Kentucky paraplegic farmer and a Minnesota farmer with nerve damage, and a sign language interpreter to help a hearing impaired farmer and his family in Wisconsin. Services provided by AgrAbility include assessing work sites and suggesting modifications, suggesting equipment adaptation and task restructuring, mobilizing and coordinating community resources and services, facilitating rural independent living, coordinating peer counseling and support groups, and stressing agricultural safety and prevention of secondary injury. Partnerships and networking involve extension services and private, nonprofit disability service organizations, as well as community groups and volunteers. The national program is carried out jointly by Purdue University's Breaking New Ground Resource Center and the National Easter Seal Society, while the Cooperative Extension Service is responsible for overall project administration. Projects in 22 states are listed. (Includes photographs.) (SAS)

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A G R A B I L I T Y P R O J E C T

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AgrAbility Project: Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities and Their Families



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People with disabilities are now one of this country's largest minority groups. Over 11 million Americans living in rural areas have a chronic or permanent disability. Hundreds of thousands of farmers, ranchers, and agricultural workers who have disabilities are a vital part of rural America and the agricultural work force. The high occupational injury rate of agricultural workers and lack of rural disability expertise and service on accommodating disability in agriculture deprives many hard-working, talented individuals from continuing productive lives in agriculture.

Through the combined dedication and expertise of the Cooperative Extension System and private, nonprofit disability organizations, AgrAbility helps thousands of these determined individuals overcome the barriers that confront them as they seek to continue in their chosen professions in agriculture. In just four years the AgrAbility Project has emerged as one of rural America's most valuable and cost-effective resources, providing on-farm assessments to over 2,500 farmers with disabilities. The knowledge and expertise on how to accommodate disability has been multiplied by educating over 11,000 agricultural, rehabilitation, and health professionals on safely accommodating disability in agriculture. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to people with disabilities is overcoming the attitudinal barriers about their ability to work in high-risk physical professions like agriculture. More than 2.11 million people at over a thousand agricultural or health-related events learned what can be done to meet the challenges of disability in agriculture and about the "ability" of individuals to overcome such challenges.

The AgrAbility Project is a shining example of a customer-driven USDA-funded program that provides needed education, assistance, and support. The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service is proud to have a role in enabling people with disabilities to participate fully in the American agricultural work force and to be a part of the rich fabric of rural community life.

Bradley K. Rein
National Program Leader
USDA Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service

The AgrAbility Project is authorized through a provision in the 1990 Farm Bill. Congress began funding the project in 1991. Each year, grants are awarded to selected state university-based Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Services (CSREES) that have joined non-profit disability organizations in providing education and assistance to agricultural workers with disabilities and their families.

The AgrAbility Project is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's CSREES, a national education network that links research, science, and technology to the needs of people where they live and work. Collaborating to support AgrAbility Project activities are: the National Easter Seal Society, a national nonprofit health organization whose mission is to help people with disabilities achieve independence by providing rehabilitation service, technological assistance, disability prevention, advocacy, and public education programs; and Purdue University's Breaking New Ground Resource Center, a nationally-recognized center for information on assistive technology in the agricultural work place that conducts research and disseminates information through on-site visits and assessment, individualized consultation, publications, and workshops.

The AgrAbility Project builds on years of valuable experience in helping farmers, ranchers and farmworkers with disabilities and their families continue to work in agriculture. It also draws on a growing knowledge base of supporting technology to strengthen their job skills and personal independence. AgrAbility services are available to all people regardless of race, creed, gender, disability, or national origin.

Cover photo: John Hancock (r), Kentucky AgrAbility Project Coordinator, consults with Bobby Meadows (l), farmer and 1993 National Disabled Veteran of the Year, on ways to accommodate Bobby's disability that will improve his productivity throughout his crop and livestock operation.

People with Disabilities Work in Agriculture

Millions of Americans earn their living in agricultural production and related occupations. They find agricultural work productive and satisfying. For most, it's not just a livelihood—it's a way of life.

Agricultural production is hazardous. The National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates that more than 200,000 farmers, ranchers and other agricultural workers experience injuries and occupational illnesses every year. A sizable percentage of these agriculture-related injuries are serious and permanent. As many as 500,000 persons working in agriculture have physical disabilities that interfere with their ability to perform essential tasks on the farm or ranch.

Tens of thousands of agricultural workers also become disabled in off-the-farm accidents or through illnesses or health conditions, such as heart disease, arthritis or cancer. Older farmers often experience age-related limitations, including decreased vision and hearing or loss of strength. These disabilities often prevent rural residents from continuing in agricultural production or related work.

Additionally, thousands of children born into agricultural families have disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and epilepsy. Physical and attitudinal barriers often prevent these children from participating fully in farm and ranch operations and from engaging in social and recreational activities enjoyed by other rural youth.

The majority of people with disabilities who work or live in agricultural settings want to continue an agricultural way of life. All too often they are frustrated in their attempts. Rural isolation, limited personal resources, gaps in rural service delivery systems, and inadequate access to agriculture-oriented assistance are among the obstacles these individuals face.

Fortunately, the AgrAbility Project offers solutions. Education and assistance are available to accommodate disabilities, eliminate barriers, and create a favorable climate among rural service providers for people with disabilities.

Deborah Finnegan-Ling (l), who lost her left leg in a farm accident, serves as an AgrAbility peer counselor in VT. Tom Scott (c), MT AgrAbility Director, designed a pipe lifter for Rick Blackwood (r), a MT rancher who has lower-back problems.



Don Baker of Campbellsburg, IN, uses a computer and other technologies to run a farm-management business and to manage his own 525 acres of field crops and 80-head cow-calf operation.

Rural Residents with Disabilities Benefit from AgrAbility

The AgrAbility Project assists agricultural and agribusiness workers who have physical and mental disabilities, which may include one or more of the following disabilities or conditions:

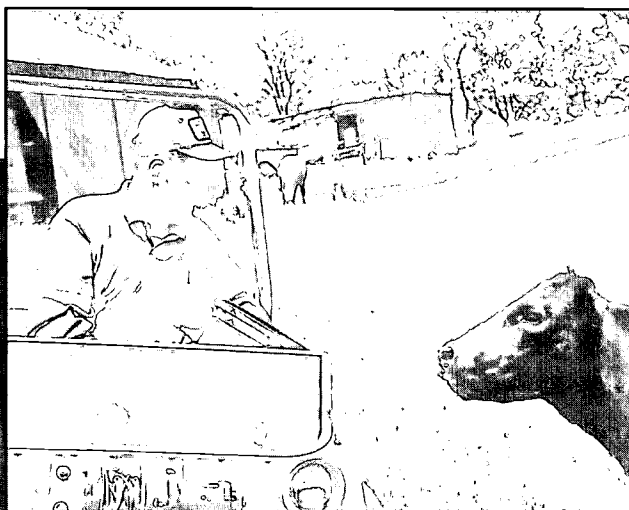
- amputation
- multiple sclerosis
- arthritis
- muscular dystrophy
- back pain
- post-polio syndrome
- cancer
- respiratory problems
- cardiac problems
- spinal cord injury
- cerebral palsy
- stroke
- deafness and hearing impairments
- traumatic brain injury
- mental retardation
- blindness or vision impairments

The stories following illustrate how AgrAbility assisted people in three states.

Kentucky AgrAbility Helps Mercer County Veteran

Staff at the Veteran's Administration requested that the Kentucky AgrAbility Project director visit Bobby Meadows, a Vietnam veteran and farmer. Bobby began farming in 1984 after he retired from the army on 50% disability. A 1989 tractor accident left Bobby with paraplegia. AgrAbility Project staff helped Bobby figure out how he could continue to run his 130-acre crop and livestock operation. AgrAbility staff evaluated Bobby's farm setup and recommended that he get a computer with farm management software; buy a 6-wheel all-terrain vehicle with finger-operated gas controls and stick guidance; install solar-powered remote-control gate openers; put a wheelchair lift on his pickup; and

Bobby Meadows feeds his cattle from his all-terrain vehicle.

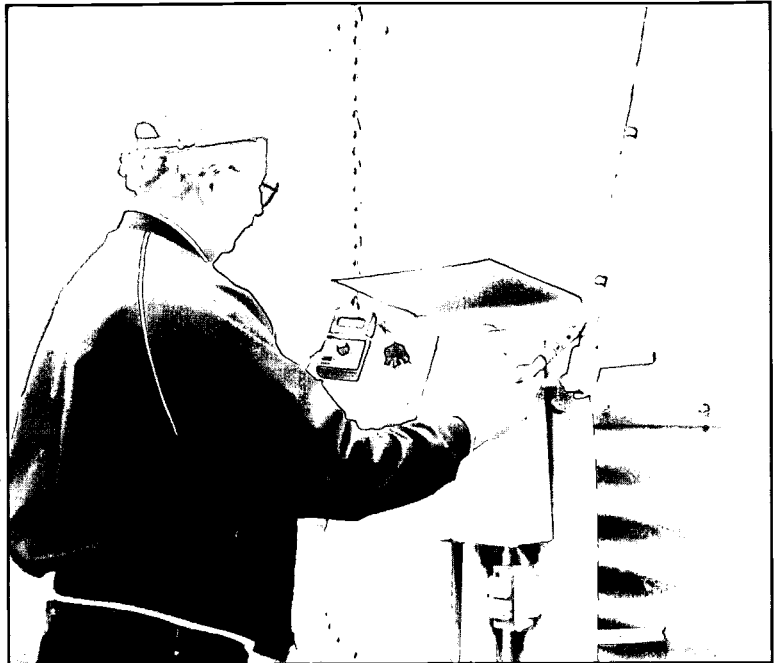


assemble a radio system so he can keep in contact with his home base. The Veteran's Administration and Department of Vocational Rehabilitation helped pay for the needed modifications and equipment that have enabled Bobby to return to full-time farming.

A two-way radio enables Mr. Meadows to talk to his family and employees from the field.

Small Changes in Equipment Allow Minnesota Grain Farmer to Keep Farming

Orlean Agnes wanted to continue to farm despite the loss of sensitivity and mobility problems he experiences as a result of nerve damage in his leg and foot. Walking, climbing, and sitting for extended periods of time are difficult for Orlean. With the help of the Minnesota AgrAbility Project he learned of ways to make adaptations around his farm that allow him to do his work without pain, including a hand control lever attached outside of his tractor to allow easier access to the 3-pt. hitch; a padded seat cover cushion; a hand clutch and a shin guard plate (to prevent hot engine burns) on the four wheeler; a grain bin level indicator and temperature probes that can be checked from the ground; and a lifting tool designed to enable users to pick up an object without bending their backs.



Orlean Agnes checks the grain level and temperature indicator without having to climb a ladder. AgrAbility staff suggested this device to enable him to work safely and efficiently, and to minimize stress on his nerve-damaged leg.

Sign Language Interpreter Helps Wisconsin Farmer Discuss Crop Strategies

Harry Jascor is a farmer who wants to improve his dairy herd, increase milk production, and grow better crops. Farming information like weather and marketing reports, cropping strategies, and upcoming producer events traditionally travels by word of mouth, through local county extension educators, farm radio programs, or farmer-member organizations. Because Harry and his family have hearing impairments and can not easily communicate with the people around them, they had difficulty tapping into these sources of information and knowledge. AgrAbility staff arranged for a sign



A sign-language interpreter (l), helps Harry Jascor (c), who is deaf, discuss crop options with Paul Leverenz (r), WI AgrAbility Director.

language interpreter from the Southeastern Wisconsin Center for Independent Living to assist Harry. With the help of the interpreter, a university Extension Service educator worked with the Jascors to design a dairy operation that would better meet their needs. "It is slow to learn things in the deaf world, especially about cows and things," Harry said, "...but now with the interpreter I can understand more. Easter Seals and AgrAbility helped us and I'm very happy."

Services Provided by AgrAbility

The AgrAbility Project provides education, practical guidance and technical assistance to help farmers, ranchers and other agricultural workers with disabilities pursue their chosen occupations and rural life-styles.

AgrAbility project staff help by:

- assessing agricultural work sites and suggesting modifications;
- suggesting how equipment may be adapted;
- assessing agricultural tasks and suggesting how they may be restructured;
- mobilizing and coordinating community resources and services;
- facilitating rural independent living;
- coordinating peer counseling and support groups; and
- stressing agricultural safety and prevention of secondary injury.

AgrAbility projects also offer education and training for rural professionals regarding the effect disability has on those working in agricultural production and living in rural areas. AgrAbility promotes increased awareness among the rural public that people with disabilities can and do work successfully in agriculture.



AgrAbility Project staff in CO, ID, IL, IN, MN, NC, and WI met with state and local organizations that assist migrant and seasonal farmworkers to determine how AgrAbility could best help farmworkers and their families who are affected by disabilities. Subsequent outreach promoted disability prevention, work-related accommodations, and access to services.

In 1970 Julius Gillison (r), of Beaufort County, SC, had a hip fusion and now uses crutches to get around his farm. AgrAbility staff collaborated with state vocational rehabilitation agency staff to make home modifications that enable him to live and work independently.

Partnership is Key to AgrAbility's Success

Partnership is the cornerstone of the AgrAbility Project. In 19 states, AgrAbility involves State Cooperative Extension Services and private, nonprofit disability service organizations in education and assistance programs for farm families affected by disability. Extension service educators and specialists along with disability professionals form the core of each AgrAbility project.

AgrAbility staff link disabled agricultural workers to a network of engineers, health and rehabilitation service providers, agricultural experts, product manufacturers and suppliers, educators, skilled tradesmen, and other rural resources. They draw on the ingenuity and assistance of community volunteers to augment project support to farm and ranch families affected by disability.

AgrAbility staff collaborate with public agencies, including vocational rehabilitation agencies and assistive technology centers, to maximize benefits for rural residents with disabilities. Local businesses, 4-H clubs, FFA chapters, commodity organizations, and other interests are actively recruited to support AgrAbility project efforts. In many states, these groups are contributing money, materials, time, and expertise to increase the impact of AgrAbility services.

Nationally, AgrAbility supports training, technical assistance, and information dissemination activities that enhance state-level projects and other organizations developing similar programs; and provides information on agriculture and disability to individuals and groups nationwide. The national program is carried out jointly by Purdue University's Breaking New Ground Resource Center and the National Easter Seal Society. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service is responsible for overall administration of the AgrAbility Project.



Brad Marsh (l), Missouri AgrAbility Project staff, and Dave Farris (r), a farmer from Dearborn, MO, discuss the need for a platform lift to assist Dave with access to the cab of his combine.



Dan Gwin makes a presentation to staff and farmers during a 1995 AgrAbility Training Workshop. Dan operates a large corn and soybean farm with his father in central Indiana, and in 1994 was named National Young Farmer of the Year.

State AgrAbility Projects



***Colorado**

Colorado State University Extension Service
Colorado Easter Seal Society

Illinois

University of Illinois Extension Service
Illinois Easter Seal Society, Inc.

Indiana

Purdue University Extension Service
Southern IN Center for Independent Living

Iowa

Iowa State University Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of Iowa, Inc.

Kentucky

University of Kentucky Extension Service
Cardinal Hill Rehabilitation Hospital

***Louisiana**

Louisiana State University Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of Louisiana

***Michigan**

Michigan State University Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of Michigan, Inc.

Minnesota

University of Minnesota Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of Minnesota
Rural Rehab Technology

Mississippi

Mississippi State University Extension Service
Mississippi Easter Seal Society

Missouri

University of Missouri Extension Service
Services for Independent Living

Montana and Idaho

Montana State University Extension Service
University of Idaho Extension Service
Northern Rocky Mountain Easter Seal Society

Nebraska

University of Nebraska Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of Nebraska

New Jersey

Rutgers University Extension Service
United Cerebral Palsy Association of New Jersey

New York

Cornell University Extension Service
NY Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health

North Carolina

North Carolina State University Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of North Carolina

North Dakota

North Dakota State University Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of North Dakota, Inc.

Ohio

The Ohio State University Extension Service
Rehabilitation Technology Center

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania State University Extension Service
Easter Seal of Centre-Clinton Counties

South Dakota

South Dakota State University Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of South Dakota
McKenna Hospital

Tennessee

University of Tennessee Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of Tennessee, Inc.

***Vermont and New Hampshire**

University of Vermont Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of New Hampshire & Vermont, Inc.

Wisconsin

University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension Service
Easter Seal Society of Wisconsin, Inc.

***AgrAbility-affiliated Programs**

A current list of state AgrAbility projects, including contact persons, addresses and telephone numbers, and other project information may be obtained from any of the following organizations:



AgrAbility Project
National Easter Seal Society
700 Thirteenth Street, N.W., Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
(202)347-3066
(202) 347-7385 (TDD)



USDA Cooperative State Research,
Education & Extension Service
Stop 2220
Washington, DC 20250-2260
(202) 401-4640
(202) 690-1899 (TDD)



AgrAbility Project
Breaking New Ground Resource Center
Purdue University
1146 ABE Building
West Lafayette, IN 47907
(800) 825-4264 (765) 494-5088

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