

AGRABILITY QUARTERLY



Promoting Success in Agriculture for People with Disabilities and Their Families

Summer 2008
Vol. 8, No. 4

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The National Grant Program
of the AgrAbility Project
is a joint effort of

The USDA Cooperative
State Research, Education
and Extension Service

University of Wisconsin-
Cooperative Extension

Easter Seals, Inc.

The Roots of an Important Program: AgrAbility and the Farm Bill

On June 18, 2008 the Farm Bill was reauthorized by Congress, securing another eight years of funding for AgrAbility. To mark this occasion we are looking back on the past seventeen years of the USDA's funding of AgrAbility, and our combined efforts to assist people with disabilities involved in production agriculture and their families.

It is well known that farming is one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States. It was in 1944 that Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the first National Farm Safety Week proclamation, which brought more awareness to safety issues on our nation's farms and ranches (National Education Center for Agricultural Safety, 2007). Every President since then has supported this proclamation. Safety standards for farm equipment have been vastly improved, and many private and public organizations are now dedicated to improving farm safety and health. Nearly 700 farmers and ranchers die in work related incidents each year. Another 80,000 workers sustain disabling injuries from work-related incidents in 2005 (National Safety Council, 2007). The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates that more than 200,000 farmers, ranchers and agricultural workers experience lost-work-time injuries and occupational illnesses every year, approximately five percent of which have serious and permanent results. Off-farm incidents and health conditions disable thousands more farmers



**Ryan Odens, AgrAbility client and 2006
Easter Seals National Representative.**

Feature Story

Roots of AgrAbility

each year. Based on nationwide data from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Economic Analysis (2000), approximately 387,900 agricultural producers could be affected by disabilities and chronic health conditions. Today, like seventeen years ago, there is a continual need for the work done by AgrAbility.

Grassroots lobbying efforts for AgrAbility had its beginnings at Easter Seals. Jennifer Dexter, assistant vice president, government relations, has been the lead person providing AgrAbility information. “Developing relationships with the right people and keeping those relationships are key components in securing funding every year for AgrAbility,” Jennifer says. Let’s explore how the concept of AgrAbility in the Farm Bill began, how the program has been implemented, and what needs to happen to ensure continued growth and success for AgrAbility in the coming years. ❖

Editorial

Advocacy for Farmers

Advocacy for Farmers with Disabilities

By Jennifer Dexter, Assistant Vice President, Easter Seals Government Relations

Easter Seals has been a significant influence on public policy affecting people with disabilities since its inception in 1919. When the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, Easter Seals was at the forefront. As one of the nation’s largest providers of services to people with disabilities and a disability advocacy organization, Easter Seals helped negotiate this groundbreaking bill. After the ADA’s passage, Easter Seals played a vital role in its implementation by traveling the country and providing training and technical assistance to businesses and other public accommodations to help them comply with the new requirements. The passage of the ADA directed the nation’s attention to the needs of people with disabilities in an unprecedented way. Its ideology continues to be the cornerstone of disability policy to this day.

During this same time period, Easter Seals was concerned about the struggles that people with disabilities working in agriculture were having, and only a few programs around the country (e.g. Indiana, Iowa, and Vermont) were addressing their needs. Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), one of the leading Senate champions of the ADA, shared this concern. When Easter Seals proposed a national model for technical assistance to farmers with disabilities to enable them to continue doing what they wanted to do, Senator Harkin took up the idea. At the same time Congress was crafting the ADA, it was reauthorizing the Farm Bill, the federal legislation authorizing all agriculture policy in the country. This confluence of events in 1990 resulted in the creation of AgrAbility in the Farm Bill. Without the development of the environment and relationships created during the many years spent developing the ADA, AgrAbility would not be the strong program it is today.

Easter Seals has worked to assure that AgrAbility has been continued in every new version of the Farm Bill since 1990. Since its inception, the federal investment in AgrAbility has grown from \$1 million to almost \$5 million. This support is recognition of the wonderful work AgrAbility is doing for individual farm families at state/regional levels and the strong advocacy relationships that Easter Seals has built in Washington, D.C. One of the ways the handful of congressional AgrAbility champions has been developed is by connecting members of Congress with the real-life experiences of farmers with disabilities. Making those connections has involved bringing AgrAbility clients to Washington, D.C. to meet directly with legislators as well as having members of Congress visit farms of AgrAbility clients to see how modifications AgrAbility facilitated are helping farmers stay productive and actively engaged in agriculture. In some cases, AgrAbility’s value created by state/regional project staff was demonstrated to a member of Congress by showing them first hand what has been done for

Editorial

Advocacy



NAP staff exhibiting at the American Occupational Therapy Association conference, shortly after receiving AOTA ‘Approved Provider’ status for continuing education.

their actual neighbors back home. In addition, Easter Seals presents the latest success stories and information from AgrAbility to critical members of Congress every year and submits written testimony that shows the continuing need for AgrAbility and the funding request for the year ahead. All of this is essential to the continued health and potential expansion of AgrAbility.

What is the environment we are working in now, and what does the future hold? Unfortunately, difficult times could possibly be ahead. Funding for AgrAbility is called “discretionary” in Washington D.C., and that means that Congress has the option to not fund the program or decrease funding of discretionary programs in any given year. As the nation continues to tighten its collective belt, programs that are a small part of the larger budget picture like AgrAbility are always in jeopardy of being identified as a

potential spending reduction. Our country’s population is aging and is experiencing age-related disabilities. There is also a belief that people with disabilities should have the opportunity to be independent and active. These two factors should translate into an increased demand for programs like AgrAbility that provide tools and resources enabling people with disabilities to remain active and independent, and with AgrAbility’s mission, to stay in production agriculture. It is critical that AgrAbility’s proven track record of helping people reach these goals is continually conveyed to legislators at the federal, state, and local levels. ❖

Focus

AgrAbility Partnerships

University of Wisconsin and Easter Seals: Eight Years of AgrAbility History

For the past eight years, National AgrAbility Project (NAP) has been administered by the University of Wisconsin-Extension and Easter Seals Headquarters in Washington, D.C. This summer not only marks the end of the current NAP grant cycle, but also the end of this NAP partnership. Fortunately, the National AgrAbility Project will be in the hands of another competent partnership, and many of the relationships and ideologies that AgrAbility staff have built upon will continue.

National AgrAbility has had the privilege of working with numerous state project staff members, organizational partners, and clients who have greatly impacted the project. From networking with hosts of national and regional health organizations, securing tens of thousands of dollars of donated print and radio advertisement space each year and obtaining grants for farm families in need of assistance, to hosting workshops and trainings for farmers, AgrAbility staff, and health care providers, NAP has been successful in meeting and going beyond its objective of assisting State and Regional AgrAbility Projects (SRAPs) in increasing quality of life for farmers with disabilities.

Resources and Partnerships

The University of Wisconsin/Easter Seals partnership have had many accomplishments. One of the biggest is the dramatic growth of National AgrAbility's web presence. The National AgrAbility website, <http://www.agrabilityproject.org>, has gone from a nearly non-existent resource bank in 2001, to a fully-accessible and constantly growing site that receives more than 25,000 unique visitors a month and averages about 500MB of information downloaded per day! The most visited place on the website is the Assistive Technology Database, which contains over 1,000 assistive technology products and features a search function that allows users to find products by keyword(s), company name, product name, or limitation. According to annual surveys of SRAP staff has also found many downloadable resources such as tip sheets, product comparison guides, articles from various sources, liability resources, OT/PT training resources, and numerous others have been rated as very useful. To ensure that individuals working with farmers or ranchers with disabilities will have access to this wealth of information, the website will continue to be maintained.



Occupational therapy students at an AgrAbility OT/PT training in Nebraska.

Strong organizational relationships and collaborations built and maintained over time are essential to the success of AgrAbility, as are combined efforts of many dedicated individuals possessing a wide variety of skills and a common dedication to the mission.

AgrAbility Partnerships: The Building Blocks

UW-Extension and Easter Seals have worked with a variety of public and private organizations while hosting the National AgrAbility Project. National AgrAbility Project would like to give a special thanks to the following organizations and affiliates who have provided invaluable support and commitment to AgrAbility over the years:

- **Cenex Harvest States Foundation and National Farmers Union**, for granting thousands of dollars in funds each year to provide farmers scholarships to attend the National Training Workshop.
- **The American Chronic Pain Association**, for their dedication to bettering the lives of all people living with chronic pain, and for sponsoring pain management seminars for clients in twelve AgrAbility states.
- **Hoard's Dairyman Magazine, Successful Farming Radio, AgriTalk Radio, and KGWA**, for their generosity in consistently publishing AgrAbility PSAs that have reached many thousands of agricultural producers.
- **Health and agriculture-related magazines such as Out Here Magazine, Rural Roads, and Farm Journal**, for publishing client stories in their magazines that reach thousands of readers across the United States.
- **SRAP staff** involved with the National Training workshop, service delivery, evaluation, diverse cultures, OT/PT training, self-employment/SSA work incentives, and marketing workgroups.

Focus

AgrAbility Partnerships

Many AgrAbility staff members have roots in production agriculture. The importance of these rural backgrounds becomes very evident when working with farmers and ranchers with disabilities. Building relationships with clients and caring for individual needs of every farmer involved in the program has made AgrAbility the unique program it is today.

One individual in particular, National AgrAbility Project Leader, Ron Schuler, has contributed much of his time and effort into making National AgrAbility a success. ❖



State and Regional AgrAbility Project staff engage in discussion during a farm site assessment activity at the 2007 NTW in Sacramento, CA.

Tribute

Dr. Ron Schuler

Eight Years with Dr. Ronald T. Schuler

Excerpt from AgrAbility Wisconsin newsletter, *Plowing Ahead*, Winter 2007

After fifteen years with the AgrAbility of Wisconsin Program, and eight years with the National AgrAbility Project, Dr. Ronald T. Schuler is retiring.

Schuler’s involvement with AgrAbility began in 1990, when Easter Seals Wisconsin expressed interest in a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Extension to help farmers with disabilities continue farming. Dr. Schuler had the ideal combination of safety specialist skills: a background in agriculture, with machinery and modifications expertise. Since he joined the partnership, Ron has been a key player in the creation and growth of AgrAbility of Wisconsin. Around this time, the USDA was developing the first funding program to help farmers with disabilities. In the fall of 1990, an official announcement was made that funding would be

available to qualifying states. Schuler took this opportunity to ask Cheryl Skjolaas, the current UWEX safety specialist and National AgrAbility program manager, to write the first grant proposal for funding of this new program in Wisconsin. With the grant’s approval, AgrAbility of

“Ron Schuler has added tremendous credibility to the program, been most responsive to project needs, provided caring and effective leadership, and will be sorely missed.”

-Ron Jester, Project Director, DE/MD AgrAbility

Tribute

Dr. Ron Schuler



Dr. Schuler at work.

Wisconsin became one of the first five states to receive funding. Today Wisconsin is the only remaining state of those original five to have received funding approval continuously since 1991. Under Schuler's leadership, the program has expanded from one rehabilitation specialist and twenty clients to five rehabilitation specialists and more than 400 clients. According to Schuler, "The success of the program is due to hiring good people and getting out of their way."

In the past eight years, Ron Schuler has put the same amount of passion and dedication into his work with the National AgrAbility Project. In 2000 Schuler led the University of Wisconsin-Extension in submitting a proposal for the National AgrAbility Grant. The USDA approved this proposal, which gave Schuler an opportunity to organize a staff to coordinate the AgrAbility program nationwide and increased his responsibility as a Project Leader for the National AgrAbility Project.

Dr. Schuler says that he has always enjoyed coming to work each morning, and we all have certainly enjoyed working with him. His passion is evident to all those who work with him and see how he takes pride in every farmer who has successfully continued to farm after their involvement with AgrAbility. ❖

Editorial

AgrAbility Thank You

A NAP Thank You

By Ronald T. Schuler, Project Leader, National AgrAbility Project

After eight years, the chapter of the Easter Seals-University of Wisconsin-Extension partnership hosting and managing the National AgrAbility Project comes to a close. The members of this partnership have enjoyed working to meet the programmatic needs of SRAPs, the specific needs of staff members within the projects, and also the needs of farmers in non-AgrAbility funded states. We greatly appreciate the support and feedback of SRAP staff through numerous provided forums. This feedback and support was very important in fulfilling the National AgrAbility Project's purpose and assisting SRAPs in successfully meeting their goals.

Special thanks go to people who served on workgroups such as the National Training Workshop, Evaluation, Cultural Diversity, OT/PT Training, peer support, and marketing to name a few. SRAP staff who served as hosts to the National Training Workshop during the past eight years provided a very valuable commitment that supported the growth of workshop attendance from about seventy-five to nearly 200, providing timely and extremely beneficial training. The Evaluation workgroup provided leadership in initiating the development of a pilot survey to evaluate the impact of assistance AgrAbility staff provide to farmers and ranchers with disabilities. The goal of

this evaluation was to determine the impact AgrAbility had on the ‘quality of life’ of farmers and ranchers served. The OT/PT Training workgroup played a key role in developing an OT/PT curriculum that SRAP staff used to conduct training in their geographic area and was used to obtain ‘approved provider’ status for continuing education from the American Occupational Therapy Association.

State and Regional AgrAbility Project staff also provided valuable feedback through numerous surveys and evaluations that were conducted. Evaluations of the National Training Workshop by participants each year provided important information for the workshop workgroup in planning the following year’s workshop. Participants in the annual agricultural assessment training conducted each spring in Wisconsin suggested changes that improved the training to better meet SRAP staff needs.

Another important contribution by SRAPs was providing the demographic data so that a report of all farmers and ranchers served by the AgrAbility Program could be compiled and provided to the USDA-CSREES. State and Regional AgrAbility Project staff reported serving 3,802 new farmers and ranchers with disabilities from 2001 to 2008.

All of this data is very important when the USDA-CSREES administrators make budget decisions and visit with legislative staff in Washington, D.C. We have appreciated SRAP staff providing the demographic data and recognize they often have many other responsibilities to their organizations.

Of course, much additional support and feedback was obtained informally during visits in the hallways during the National Training Workshop and Agricultural Assessment Training and through individual phone calls. As partners in the National AgrAbility Project, our staff was very interested in and dedicated to identifying and understanding issues and concerns of SRAP staff in order to insure improved support of our mission.

As many of the members of this NAP staff go in different directions, we will always recall the friendships and accomplishments that made our experience satisfying and rewarding while working on the National Project. Some members of the staff will still be involved with AgrAbility of Wisconsin while others will be seeking opportunities elsewhere. I wish you all well! ❖

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The AgrAbility Project promotes success in agriculture for individuals with disabilities and their families through on-site assistance and educational resources. For additional information on the National AgrAbility Project or for a current list of state project sites, addresses, and telephone numbers contact:

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 Madison, WI 53706
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The AgrAbility Project is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture CSREES. Funding for this document was provided under project number 2004-41590-01880.