

“Time is money, but safety is priceless.”

*by Theresa Whalen
CFA Farm Safety Consultant*

For Manitoba potato producer Sheldon Wiebe, farm safety is not just something you do – it is a way of thinking. Sheldon manages the family farm J.P. Wiebe & Sons near Macgregor, Manitoba. He says “you can’t control everything in agriculture so you should control all the things you can – and that starts with your own behaviour and the safety choices you make as you do your work.”

Sheldon has been farming with his dad Ben since he was a teenager. He’s now responsible for the operation where, with six full-time and 20 seasonal staff, he grows 1,000 acres of processing potatoes for French fries, 1,400 acres of hard red spring wheat, 1,000 acres of canola, and 600 acres of winter wheat.

After many years with no significant farm-related injuries, Sheldon’s renewed commitment to safety came from an experience he wants to make sure never happens again on his farm. About three years ago, the young daughter of one of Sheldon’s workers lost her hand and forearm to a potato seed cutting table. Although the manufacturer’s safety guards were in the correct place, the little girl’s curiosity led her too far. She was “helping” her dad at the table. The tragic lesson learned is that she should not have been anywhere near the equipment.

“A farm can be a dangerous place – it is an industrial workplace and we all need to be constantly cautious and teach safety to everyone on the farm - kids, parents, employees, and visitors alike.”

The investigation from the incident spawned a heart-felt commitment to safety at the Wiebe farm starting with the development of a safety plan. To learn more about making an effective safety plan, Sheldon took a course called the ‘Safe Farm Check Program’ which examines eleven elements in the development of a Health & Safety Program.

The Safe Farm Check Program was developed for Manitoba potato producers offered by Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives (MAFRI) and the provincial Workplace Safety and Health Program. Potato producers wanted to be proactive in the development of a farm safety and food safety program before it became mandatory. They also needed to satisfy processors who more and more demand implemented safety plans before awarding production contracts. More information on this program can be found at www.manitoba.ca/agriculture/farmsafety .

After taking the course, Sheldon met with his staff to discuss safety concerns and was amazed at the ideas they had to make simple safety changes to many areas on the farm. The employees all agreed that it was important to go above and beyond industry standard. He then took these ideas to the next level and has begun developing a written safety plan, which will be used throughout the enterprise.

“Safety requires more paperwork, but once you develop a plan – it is not so bad,” says Wiebe. “A lot of the things we were doing anyway – we just document them now. The safety plan gives us a safer food product and a better place to work. This is the new reality for farming and there is more to come.”

“I believe that the most important way to instil safety in a business is to lead by example,” says Wiebe. “I make it clear to everyone who works here – there is only one way to do things, and that is the safe way.”

“On the personal side of things, farm safety is important because we want our employees to be safe so they can go home at the end of each day and enjoy their lives,” says Wiebe. “On the business side of things, and for liability and legal issues – we want to be able to use the proper processes to ensure our farm is financially safe as well as safe for our workers. Injuries are very inefficient and non-productive – so it is better to prevent them from happening in the first place.”

“We all know farmers have a timeline to get their jobs done - beat the weather, beat the last planting date on the calendar or the first frost, so it is usually ‘rush-rush-rush’. Time is money, but safety is priceless.”

“*Plan • Farm • Safety*” is the theme of the 2010 Canadian Agricultural Safety campaign. Each aspect of the theme will be promoted over the next three years. This year the campaign will promote "Plan" with safety walkabouts and planning for safety. In the second year, the focus will be on "Farm" including implementation, documentation and training. In the third year, emphasis will be on "Safety" including assessment, improvement and further development of safety systems.

The year-long “Plan” campaign will be launched with Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW), from March 14 to 20. The Canadian Federation of Agriculture and Canadian Agricultural Safety Association deliver CASW in partnership with Farm Credit Canada and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

For more information on how to “*Plan • Farm • Safety*” go to www.planfarmsafety.ca .

- 30 -

For more information call:

Theresa Whalen, CFA Farm Safety Consultant

Tel: (613) 822-0016 E-mail: farmsafety@cfafca.ca

*** Photos are available at www.casa-acsa.ca to accompany this article.