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Substation projects  
on the **Fast track**

**Farm Rescue:**  
Helping hands in the Heartland





# When getting into the field is impossible...

## Farm Rescue is there to help

By Tracie Bettenhausen

**Volunteers Jack and Genita Limke, with their girls Megan and Anna, are living in the Farm Rescue camper for a month.**

Bill Gross is asked which he likes better: planting or harvesting?

“I like planting,” Gross says.

“He likes the big power shift tractor, that’s what he likes,” Bill Krumwiede adds, laughing.

It’s a glance into a relationship built on long days, sleepless nights and a common passion: helping family farmers in crisis.

### **There from the start**

Farm Rescue started helping farmers plant their crops in spring 2006. Gross wanted to emulate the old time farming bees, neighbors helping each other when tragedy

struck. Gross says because families are much smaller today, and because there aren’t as many family farms, it’s hard for farmers to help each other.

When Farm Rescue was launched, volunteers were hard to come by. At times, it was just Gross and Krumwiede working to get the crop in. “Sometimes when we first got going, especially in western North Dakota, it was just a couple of us in the field. We went day and night a lot of times,” Gross remembers. “I’d get into the field at 10 at night, and I’d tell Bill [Krumwiede] not to come back out until nine in the morning. Well, here he’d be coming back out at four in the morning.”

Krumwiede grew up on a farm and continued farming even when he started work at the William J. Neal Station near Velva in 1974. “When they closed down the plant I had to decide if I was going to keep farming or transfer to Antelope Valley Station. Well, farming wasn’t that good at the time, so I quit farming, moved to Hazen and worked at Beulah,” Krumwiede says.

Krumwiede worked for Basin Electric for 31 years. Not long after Krumwiede retired, Farm Rescue came into the picture. Up until this spring, he helped at every location Farm Rescue helped. He only started missing farms when Farm Rescue started running



**Bill Krumwiede, a Basin Electric retiree who worked at the William J. Neal Station and Antelope Valley Station, was one of Farm Rescue's first volunteers. Today he lives on the farm where he grew up, near Voltaire, ND.**

two sets of operations to keep up with the work. "I'd like to keep doing it as long as I could, and as long as my wife will put up with me being gone," Krumwiede says.

### **Growing like a weed**

In that first spring, Farm Rescue helped 10 North Dakota farmers plant their crop. In 2008, the non-profit organization helped 28 farmers in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Montana. Gross says the growth shows the need for Farm Rescue. "We had more than 50 applications this year. So there's still about half of them we had to turn down," Gross says.

The number of cases Farm Rescue can accept is directly related to the amount the organization collects in donations. The 2008 spring planting budget is \$200,000. "We don't pay any of these volunteers, so we keep our costs very low. We're able to help a lot of people for a very small amount of money, in a relative sense," Gross says.

Basin Electric Power Cooperative has been a Farm Rescue sponsor since the first planting season. Emily McKay, charitable giving coordinator, says Basin Electric usually matches the sponsorship of the rural electric co-ops.

### **Who needs vacation?**

Volunteering for Farm Rescue has become a trend at UPS, the company for which Gross is a full-time pilot. Randy Weaver is a pilot from Kentucky, who not only took a week of vacation to volunteer for Farm Rescue, but convinced his father and uncle to do the same. "It didn't take much prying. They said, 'Okay, we'll do it,'" Weaver laughs.

Weaver has known Gross for two years. Gross told Weaver about Farm Rescue while they were flying one day. "It's like an honor to be able to come out here and help people. They really need help at times like this," Weaver says.

Jack Limke is another pilot at UPS. He's known Gross since their days as student pilots at the University of North Dakota. "Some of the farmers look at me like they think I'm crazy. 'You mean you're using your vacation to come and do this?' And I'm like, 'Yeah,'" Limke laughs.

In fact, this spring Limke brought his entire family along for the month-long stint. Jack's wife Genita is homeschooling their daughters, Anna and Megan, for the last month of school. "We live in a city so this is neat. At the last farm, they

## **Money well spent**

Farm Rescue is a hand-up, not a hand-out. "Sometimes people think Farm Rescue gives money out to farmers. We do not distribute any funds to farmers. We just come in and do the work when they can't do it themselves," Gross says.

Volunteers at Farm Rescue include an application review committee, consisting of professionals who work at the Department of Agriculture and Farm Service Agency. Farm Rescue doesn't help farmers who are financially mismanaging their operation, or farmers who own more than 3,000 acres of land.

All machinery is donated by RDO Equipment Company and most of the fuel is donated by a local Farmer's Union Oil or Cenex. Farmers supply the seed and fertilizer. Gross says the number of farmers that can be helped each year depends completely on donations. "If we had more sponsors and public donations, we'd be able to help more farmers," Gross says. The 2008 spring planting budget is \$200,000, double the budget of the previous year.

Gross says after NBC's "Today" ran a story featuring Farm Rescue last year, donations came from as far as Hawaii. Gross says most donors have a Midwest connection.

## **Wanted: A strong back, helping hands**

More than 60 percent of cases Farm Rescue accepts are illness-related, 20 percent are injuries, and about 10 percent are natural disasters.

Here are some of the cases they've helped this year:

- Broken bones from car accidents and falls,
- Wife paralyzed by viral infection,
- Facial reconstruction after being kicked by a horse,
- Heart surgery, cancer treatments, kidney dialysis,
- Injuries from getting caught in a PTO (power take-off) shaft,
- Back surgery,
- Injuries from getting run over by a combine,
- Stroke recovery, and
- Rebuilding after tornado destruction.



**(Inset) Eureka, SD, farmers Martha and Damian Kappenman say without Farm Rescue's help they wouldn't be able to put in a crop this year.**

**Farm Rescue founder Bill Gross was featured as a "CNN Hero" during an episode of "Larry King Live" in June.**

**See the video at [cnn.com/heroes](http://cnn.com/heroes) and click on "See all the 2008 CNN heroes."**

were playing with the calves and got to see a bunch of them being separated from moms. The girls are learning empathy," Genita Limke says.

The farm families form a bond with the volunteers. Gross says some of the farmers call a week after Farm Rescue has left, just to see how everyone is doing. "Farmers for the most part are pretty humble. They want to do everything themselves; that's why they farm. They're not used to having a big group of people come in like this and help them out," Limke says.

### Support at the roots

Gross becomes involved in the farmers' lives as well especially when some of these farmers have faced terrible ordeals. "It is very stressful and emotional; emotionally draining, I should say," Gross says.

Last fall, Gross visited three farmers at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, in one trip. He knows each farmer's story well. About one of them, Gross says, "His wife, about a month and a half ago, started feeling dizzy,

so she went in to the hospital. They sent her to the Mayo Clinic for more thorough tests. They told her she had brain cancer and it's a long ways along. They said there's nothing they could do and told her she had 30-to-45 days to live. So she's home and has steadily

gotten worse and is bed-ridden. He wants to spend these last days with her. So we're going to harvest his crop to keep him going."

Despite the emotional roller coaster, the Cleveland, ND, native says he's happy to hang on. "I really, really enjoy it. It brings me a lot of happiness to be back in my native state and helping out family farmers where my roots are."

Because Gross has a full-time job, he takes vacation to coordinate Farm Rescue's operations. Things got so busy he even hired a director of operation to help. He hopes to bring this organization to the point where it can grow on its own. "Oh, I see Farm Rescue going on hopefully forever, long after I'm gone," Gross says. "That's the whole point of this, that the organization takes on a life of its own, and that people and sponsors support Farm Rescue and to continue on to help farmers and agricultural communities."

And if you're still wondering why Gross really likes planting better, here's his explanation: "I think it's more important to get the crop in the ground. If you don't get the crop in the ground, you're not going to have anything to harvest."

Spoken like a true farmer.



**Volunteer Dave Mitchell of New Jersey enjoys a hearty laugh as the men calculate the ratio of fertilizer to seed. Also pictured: Jack Limke of Kentucky, Bill Weaver of Pennsylvania and Chad Hansen of Montana.**

# Surviving a nightmare...



**Damian and Martha Kappenman, Eureka, SD, burned down their home because it was so badly damaged by the tornado.**

It had been a tough year, even before Aug. 24, 2006. Drought had been so bad, the registered Charlais cattle were already out of pasture, being fed hay in the farmyard.

Storms were common that year, too, for Damian and Martha Kappenman, who farm and ranch near Eureka, SD. So when another storm blew in, it took awhile for the Kappenmans to realize the danger.

“You never know. Your life can change in about four-and-a-half minutes,” Damian says.

Damian, his son and nephew had pulled into the yard minutes before the “black wall to the northwest” showed up on their porch. When the patio furniture started flying, the Kappenmans ran to the basement.

“It just started to scream. I mean, the windows and doors just started to scream as if somebody was standing right beside you screaming with a high-pitched voice,” Damian says.

“I remember hollering at the guys, ‘follow me.’ We were separated, and I remembered hearing the guys scream, and then I didn’t hear them any more,” Martha breaks down. “It all turned out good.”

Everyone survived the tornado, but their farmstead was destroyed. The Kappenmans rented out their land the following spring.

This spring, they were ready to have a go at farming again and Farm Rescue was willing to help. “If it wouldn’t have been for them, we probably wouldn’t have done it, probably would’ve just left the land rented out and worked off the farm,” Damian says.

“It’s a hope, you know? Knowing that somebody is willing to stretch out and help you. It’s almost like a healing for a person, I think. Knowing that somebody cared enough to help,” Martha says.

It happened in an instant. “The flames come, it was just so fast, I couldn’t even explain it, how fast things happened,” Wes Doepke says.

Doepke farms near Wilton, ND. July 31, 2007, he was harvesting winter wheat when his combine sparked the field behind him. The flames, pushed by wind, surrounded the cab. He was burned over 50 percent of his body. Doepke was airlifted to Regions Hospital in St. Paul, MN, where he spent three weeks in a coma.

Doepke’s hired help was able to finish the wheat crop. Farm Rescue was able to make it to harvest the soybeans and pinto beans. Doepke says it’s hard watching someone else do the work. “It hurts, it does, it hurts. When it’s something that you’ve, you know, worked all spring for, and sprayed and taken care of, watched it rain and not rain. To not be able to do it yourself, it’s tough not to be around while they were doing it. But on the other hand, I’m glad that they were here to do it,” Doepke says.

Doepke says he plans to sponsor Farm Rescue in the future.



**Wes Doepke, Wilton, ND, right, spent hours in physical therapy while volunteers harvested his crop.**