



Farmers Need to Protect Their Hearing

A study shows farmers are not adequately educated on the risk of hearing loss. Consider custom ear plugs as a hearing protection option.

February 2, 2010

Photo by Lesley Ward

Farmers can protect their hearing when using loud farm machinery by wearing custom ear plugs, ear muffs or a combination of the two. As small farmers take precautions to stay safe when working the fields, they must not forget about their ears. Loud noises produced by farm machinery can put farmers at an increased risk for hearing loss.

A study performed at Eastern Washington University's Department of Communication Disorders showed that more than half of farmers surveyed in eastern Washington state had been educated on the hazards of not wearing hearing protection. For those who learned about hearing loss—mostly younger farmers—the information was usually passed to them informally through word of mouth or through other means of self-education.

Whether they've received education on the hazards or not, farmers need to wear some sort of hearing protection, be it earmuffs or ear plugs, says Fuller.

"Ideally, farmers who wish to preserve their hearing should consider custom ear plugs," he said. "Custom plugs are molded to the contours of the individual's ear, thereby providing an excellent seal within the ear canal against intense noise."

One reason the farmers gave for not using hearing protection was not being able to hear farm equipment if it malfunctioned. Custom ear plugs cut down on the intensity of the noise but allow for a range of frequencies. In other words, the farmer can hear how the farm equipment is working but at a quieter level.

One drawback to custom ear plugs, however, is that they cost about \$100 to \$150 dollars.

"For those who cannot afford them, a combination of hearing muffs and non-customized plugs should be used," Fuller said. "The two in combination cuts down more on the intensity of farm equipment than either one alone."

For farmers who have gone a long time without using hearing protection, Fuller advises they see an audiologist to determine the extent of their hearing loss, if any.

"Whether or not the farmer has a hearing loss, the audiologist can assist the individual in obtaining custom-made ear plugs," Fuller said. "Audiologists are an excellent source of education on the hazards of noise and how to prevent further damage to the hearing mechanism."