



Working Through Life's Challenges

Automation and accommodations allow farmers to continue working their passion through age and disability.

By Lisa Munniksmma, HF Managing Editor

Cattle farmer George Green hadn't anticipated needing a 15-inch steel rod in his back when he set out to work on his feed grinder one morning, but one accident later, he found himself in the hospital with just that.

Left with arthritis and decreased mobility, his prospects for continuing his cattle operation weren't good.

No one expects his life to change overnight, but injury, illness and the effects of aging aren't something that are in our control. Small farmers in general are a passionate lot who take their on-farm duties seriously.

Whether or not the farm is a means of income or simply for enjoyment, experiencing a life-altering event that threatens the work you do there could be devastating. Recognizing an aging farming population and the risk of the work they do, there are organizations dedicated to assisting farmers who aren't able to carry on at the farm on the level they once were.

The AgrAbility Project is a nonprofit partnership that offers free education and assistance to people with disabilities who are involved in agriculture.

Sponsored by the USDA, 22 states have AgrAbility Project offices, and the National AgrAbility Project serves residents in the other states. Among the services offered by AgrAbility is a broad-based assessment of a farmer's situation that includes recommendations for facility and equipment modifications that will allow the farmer to continue to work toward his or her goals.

In Green's experience, AgrAbility worked with him to transition his operation from cattle to organic fruit and vegetable production, including connecting him with the local small-business enterprise program for additional assistance.

Industry-wide, equipment manufacturers are taking notice of the needs of this population, as well. John Deere, for example, has introduced several automation features for its equipment, allowing farmers to work more efficiently and with less physical effort.

Photo Courtesy of John Deere John Deere's iMatch AutoHitch allows you to hook up the PTO drive shaft without leaving the operator's seat. The Possibilities
The range of disabilities and issues facing farmers are as varied as farming operations.

Steve Swain, rural rehabilitation specialist and outreach coordinator with the National AgrAbility Project, says he sees a lot of arthritis, back impairments, spinal-cord injuries and amputations.

"I'm seeing more age-related issues," he says. He can identify with the people he's helping, too: "I'm going on 58. Growing up on 220 acres, we didn't have a lot of money, so we did things the hard way. It does damage that you don't think about at the time."

Whether due to age, injury or desire for easier-to-operate machinery, John Deere's equipment automation advancements are easing the difficulty of working with these issues.

"Several years ago, we identified some key, unmet needs in compact tractors. One of the big needs is the ease of attaching," explains John Deere compact tractor representative Dan Paschke.

Photo Courtesy of John Deere The AutoConnect mid-mount mower deck allows you to drive the tractor over the mower deck, lock down the wheels on the mower deck, and hook up the PTO automatically. The first of their compact-tractor automation features was the iMatch Quick-Hitch, a quick coupler for the



3-point hitch. Paschke explains this feature was already in use in other equipment but wasn't available for compact tractors.

In 2007 came the iMatch AutoHitch, which is a PTO coupler that allows you to hook up the PTO drive shaft without leaving the operator's seat.

"It's easy to use, and it's safe. You don't have to get on and off the tractor, and you can reach the levers," Paschke says.

The latest automation feature is the AutoConnect mid-mount mower deck. Rather than having to get off of the tractor and fumble around with heavy attachments, you drive the tractor over the mower deck, lock down the wheels on the mower deck, the PTO hooks up automatically.

These automation advancements aren't only assisting disabled farmers but are making equipment operation safer industry-wide. If tractor implements are easier to attach and unattach, users are more likely unhook unneeded equipment, which makes equipment operation safer.

Asking for Help

As a hard-working, self-sustaining bunch, it's often difficult for people in the ag community to reach out and ask for assistance. It's important for everyone to know that assistance is there when it's needed, though.

Swain recalls one farm show where AgrAbility was exhibiting. There was a man in a wheelchair going down the aisle of display booths, and he was hugging the far side of the aisle away from the AgrAbility booth.

"It's like he was saying, 'I don't want to face this right now.' It takes a different timeframe for everybody. We try to show people what is possible and jog their mind to say, 'OK. Maybe I need to look at these things.'

"There are some people who are rough and tough and very independent. It's hard to get information to the general farming public."

Learn more about the National AgrAbility Project at www.agrabilityproject.org or by calling 800-825-4264.