Electrical Lines and Pesticide Application Equipment

The Situation
Each year tens of thousands of pesticide applications are made on North Dakota farms and ranches. Often they are made without incident, but in June of 2013, a 19 year old applicator tangled with an overhead electrical line on a farm near Mott. He lost his life. His family and the farmer (employer) were devastated. The father of the young man contacted our NDSU County Extension Agent in Adams County and asked if we could develop training materials to educate applicators about the dangers of sprayers coming into contact with high voltage electrical wires.

Extension Response
County agents across the state regularly train and certify over 11,000 farmers and ranchers in safe application techniques. State specialists also work with about 3,000 commercial applicators who apply pesticides on agricultural lands. Thus it was logical that this issue should be incorporated into the curriculum. The local agent worked with the father to develop a detailed written story that was provided to the Extension Pesticide Specialist. Research discovered excellent resources were available from Fortis Alberta, the primary utility for the Canadian Province of Alberta. Permission for using their recommendations and video footage were obtained and then incorporated into a presentation. In addition, the story of the incident, provided by the father, was edited and narrated by an Extension Communication Specialist. The result was a 15 minute presentation that agents and specialists could use at pesticide certification trainings in 2014. The presentation was also used in 2015 and will be in 2016. By May, all certified private and commercial applicators statewide will have received this important safety lesson. To date, this essential training tool is also being used in Minnesota, Ohio, North Carolina, and Washington State.

Impacts
Tragedy can cause extreme sorrow in a family, especially when it cuts a promising life short. In this case, extension was sought out because we have the venue and the expertise to provide a meaningful warning to others. Instead of only regrets and sadness, a family has reclaimed a sense of purpose and encouragement.

The story is somber and the message stark. Applicators are often quiet and stunned by the lesson. Agents and specialists usually place the lesson before a break or lunch because it is awkward to transition to another topic. While the lesson tells of the incident, it provides techniques for avoiding power lines and if the lines arc, applicators are given specific instructions on how to disengage and how to carefully exit equipment.

A video of the presentation is available here: http://tinyurl.com/electrical-hazards

Feedback
From Dean Wehri, father of Michael:
"I received a text today from a friend of mine from Streeter after attending his local (pesticide) training. He said the video quieted the room full of tough, grizzled farmers. Thank you so much for helping to put that video together. It is making a difference."

Kelly Lozensky, commercial applicator:
"I would like to thank you and all of your staff for explaining electrical safety and spray rigs so well at the certification. The right person was listening that day…..three days after the meeting the power company was installing higher poles…..I have been calling them now for two years about this.

Contacts
Andrew Thostenson,
NDSU Extension Pesticide Specialist
NDSU Dept. 7060, P.O. Box 6050
Fargo, North Dakota, 58108-6050
701-231-8050
Andrew.Thostenson@ndsu.edu

Julie Kramlich
NDSU Adams County Extension Agent
Hettinger Research Extension Center, PO Box 1100
Hettinger, North Dakota 58639-1100
701-567-2735
Julie.Kramlich@ndsu.edu