



Taking care of our own

ADOBE STOCK

A new mental health crisis line offers help for those facing the unique stresses of agriculture

BY JON BELL

IF YOU DON'T WORK IN AGRICULTURE, or aren't involved in it in some way, you may not be aware the suicide rate among farmers is three-and-a-half times higher than that of the general population. The risk is also elevated among workers in agriculture, forestry and fishing.

Todd Nash knows this a little too well.

A rancher in the Eastern Oregon city of Enterprise and the current president of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, Nash has felt the impact of suicide by way of close personal friends and families he knows.

Though the numbers might not be reflected in official state data, Nash says the county — population just 7,500 over 3,100 square miles — has seen 14 suicides in the past two years alone.

"The numbers don't always jibe with what the Oregon Health Authority has, but talk to our mental health director here at our center for wellness, and we're at a rate that's three **>>**



PHOTO COURTESY OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

"The suicide rates of the agricultural community in Eastern Oregon are through the roof. It felt to me like that was wholly unacceptable."

— Allison Myers, associate dean of Extension, Oregon State University

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times the national average,” said Nash, who’s also a Wallowa County commissioner. “It is very personal to me.”

Whether it’s the stress that comes with working in agriculture, the isolation of living in remote areas, or the longstanding belief that they just need to power through their depression and challenging times, farmers and agriculture and nursery workers deal with compounding factors that can weigh heavily on their mental health. In some cases, the pressure can ultimately get to be too much.

For a long time, agriculture-specific mental health services haven’t been available. But now, thanks to a coordinated effort that’s involved everyone from Nash to Oregon State University, the Oregon Legislature and a national nonprofit called the AgriSafe Network, help is on the way.

The Oregon Association of Nurseries and other agricultural organizations successfully lobbied the Oregon Legislature to fund the creation of the helpline, with Rocky Dallum of the Cattlemen leading the lobbying effort.

“Suicide is an issue to be taken seriously, and the stresses of agriculture are unique,” OAN Executive Jeff Stone said. “It’s affected me and people I know, and it should be addressed openly. We’re proud that is happening in a meaningful way.”

In September, the AgriStress Helpline (804-897-2474) launched in Oregon. A free crisis phone and texting line for people in agriculture and in agriculture communities, AgriStress is staffed by crisis support specialists who have been trained in mental and behavioral health in agriculture.

Those specialists can match callers



PHOTO COURTESY OREGON CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION

“... talk to our mental health director here at our center for wellness, and we’re at a [suicide] rate that’s three times the national average.”

— Todd Nash, Eastern Oregon rancher and president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association

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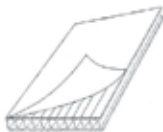


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with the services and resources they need to deal with whatever mental health issues they may be experiencing.

“A crisis specialist is going to engage them and talk to them about their concerns, then get them onto the next step of their path toward the services and care they need,” said Tara Haskins, total farmer health director for AgriSafe.

“Sometimes just the sheer fact that they can call and talk to someone who’s been trained in the stressors of agriculture can be enough to help diffuse anxiety and worry.”

Connecting people with care

Originally founded and incorporated in Iowa in 2003, the AgriSafe Network today is a national nonprofit working to educate healthcare professionals and agriculture workers about the health and safety of those in the agriculture, fishing and forestry industries — all of which are prominent in Oregon.

The nonprofit initially started working on the concept of the AgriStress Help Line in about 2018.

“We started out by asking, if we could dream what we wanted for a crisis line to be for people in agriculture, what would it have?” Haskins said. “We knew we wanted to provide the best care for people in the industry because they do so much for us.”

The team at AgriSafe came up with the model in part based on other crisis lines that have proven to be helpful in other industries.

It launched in 2022 and was available in six states: Wyoming, Texas, Missouri, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and Virginia. Oregon came on board in September and became the seventh.

The free help line is staffed by crisis response specialists who’ve had 300 hours of training plus additional training geared specifically toward agriculture and the stresses it can bring, including drought, disease, labor shortages, uncertain markets and more.

These specialists also get additional training every quarter on specific agriculture-related topics.



AgriStress Helpline in Oregon

The free AgriStress Helpline is now live in Oregon. Farmers, ranchers and agriculture workers struggling with mental health can call or text 833-897-2474 to talk to trained professionals who understand agriculture and can help connect them to a range of services.

The line is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is available in 160 languages and can also accept text messages in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and French. Every caller is offered a follow-up call 24 hours later to help ensure their needs have been met.

Haskins said the line does get calls from agriculture workers who may be on the verge of suicide, and crisis specialists trained in de-escalation and emotional support can often help by connecting callers directly with emergency service providers and other resources. But the line also handles a wide variety of other kinds of calls, from farmers stressed about natural disasters or tight finances to third-party callers who are concerned about a friend or a loved one.

“Typically in crisis lines, 20–30% are calls from someone worried about a person, and they want to allay some of the worry and uncertainty,” Haskins said. “Our specialists really look at all the opportunities to connect people to care and make sure there are no gaps in treatment.”

AgriStress in Oregon

Allison Myers is an associate dean for Extension and engagement and program leader for family and community health at Oregon State University. For years she has been focused on work promot- ➤

The logo for Biringer Nursery features a stylized graphic of two trees with leaves inside circular frames. Below the graphic, the text "BIRINGER NURSERY" is written in a large, black, sans-serif font. Underneath, it lists "WHOLESAL GROWERS OF" followed by several types of trees and shrubs: "Fruit, Flowering & Shade Trees", "Deciduous Shrubs", "Espalier Apple & Pear", "Combination Fruit Trees", "Dwarf Fruit Cherries on Gisela™", and "Frost Peach™". At the bottom, it provides the location "Mt. Vernon, WA", phone numbers "360-848-5151" and "Fax 360-848-5959", email "biringernursery@gmail.com", and website "www.biringernursery.com".



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ing mental health, including serving as lead investigator on seven federal grants. She, too, has been touched by suicide and unfortunate deaths.

“I’m a person who’s tired of losing people I love to deaths of despair,” she said. “I do have some experience in my family and my lived experience in behavioral health. I know people who have died from overdoses [or] alcohol.”

Myers also became familiar with the shockingly high suicide rate in the agricultural community of Eastern Oregon — and decided to try and do something about it.

“The suicide rates of the agricultural community in Eastern Oregon are through the roof,” she said. “It felt to me like that was wholly unacceptable.”

Having traveled around the country for her work, Myers had come across AgriSafe and the AgriStress crisis line.

Familiar with the success of crisis lines in other health-related areas like smoking cessation, she thought AgriStress, especially because of its ag-specific focus, might be helpful in Oregon. She also liked the idea of a crisis line that would offer farmers and agriculture workers — normally a stoic bunch that would cringe at the thought of going into a clinic to deal with stress or anxiety — a private way to get help.

“These kinds of interventions are tailored and made relevant to you,” Myers said. “If we can get people to call it, it works.”

She reached out to Commissioner Nash last year to see if he thought bringing AgriStress to Oregon was a good idea and if people would use it.

“It didn’t take long for me to warm up to the idea of having a hotline that would direct people toward people on the other end that would, in essence, be

speaking our language,” Nash said. “It’s like the 988 [national Suicide & Crisis Lifeline] but for someone who understands agriculture.”

‘A huge win’

Working together, along with Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, Myers and Nash helped push Oregon Senate Bill 955 during the most recent legislative session. The bill aimed to secure state funding to run the AgriStress line in Oregon.

Ideally, an endowment of more than \$2 million would have been able to fund the service in perpetuity, but limited funding in the legislature meant that SB 955 could only land \$300,000 as passed unanimously by lawmakers. Still, it was a big spark to kick things off.

“It’s a huge win,” Myers said. “We amplified a very important conversation.”

Pulling in partners like Moda and the Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization, as well as working closely with AgriSafe, moved the effort forward and helped kick off the AgriStress line in Oregon on Sept. 1.

Nash said it’s a great place to start, though there’s much more work to do. And Myers said the hotline is just one end of a continuum of care that needs to begin long before someone feels the need to pick up the phone.

Prevention, she added, and the ability to talk about mental health in a supportive way, will be key in addressing future issues in the agriculture community. But the effort is heading in the right direction.

“As heartbreaking as it can be to do the work, it’s very fulfilling,” Myers said. “For people to see us putting an evidenced-based solution into practice through a bipartisan process — it’s a community health person’s dream come true.” ☺

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