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Will technology double yields by 2030?

Pages 6-7

Tips for drying and handling wet corn

Page 14

Get inside scoop on new ISDA director

Page 41



Helping hands

By TOM J. BECHMAN

YOU struggled to climb down out of the combine last night because your legs nearly refused to move. You've noticed them tightening up more lately whenever you sit for longer periods.

"It's just part of getting older," your friend tells you. Unfortunately, you might even have a doctor who tells you that. What Stephen Swain would like you to know is that maybe there isn't anything that can be done to improve your condition. But then again, maybe there is. At the very least, there may be methods of doing daily activities that will lessen the pain and allow you to continue life more normally.

Swain is a rural rehabilitation specialist with Breaking New Ground, a program that assists farmers with disabilities. The brainchild of Bill Field, Purdue University safety specialist, it started three decades ago. The program went national under the name AgrAbility nearly two decades ago. It's a name that's still used today.

What's different today is people's attitudes. When BNG started, some people, even journalists, thought it was just for people who had lost limbs, who they figured shouldn't be farming anyway.

Field, of course, disagreed and persisted. And the program

Key Points

- Breaking New Ground helps farmers with special needs.
- Arthritis forces some older farmers to retire.
- Help is available through Breaking New Ground.

is still for those folks. "But it's also for farmers suffering from a disability as common as arthritis," Swain says. In fact, arthritis is one of the biggest cripplers of farmers today. In 2007, BNG and the Arthritis Foundation, Indiana Chapter, collaborated to produce a DVD, "Gaining Ground on Arthritis." You can learn more about the DVD at the Arthritis and Agriculture link at www.breakingnewground.info.

Loves his role

Swain, originally from Rush County, has been around agriculture all his life, from managing a swine farm to selling feed. For the past nine years, he's worked with people who need his help. "I love what I do," he says. "I meet with clients, usually in their home on the farm, and together we determine if there are ways to help them do what they do with less pain."

The toughest part of the job is identifying who needs help, Swain says. For various reasons, farm folk are sometimes



NO MIRACLE MAN: Rehabilitation specialist Stephen Swain doesn't profess to have all the answers. But he cares, and he does whatever he can to help farmers suffering from arthritis or another disability stay as mobile as possible so that they can continue in their chosen occupation — farming.

slow to come forward. Maybe they just don't know that such a program exists. Too many times they think they must just live with aches and pains.

"We came to the Farm Progress Show [in Illinois] be-

cause we wanted to get exposure, and we met lots of Hoosiers this year," Swain says. "We go to the Indiana State Fair for the same reason. We want people to know that we're here to help."

Besides visiting the BNG

Web site, you can call toll-free 800-825-4264 or e-mail Swain at swainj@ecn.purdue.edu.

Both Swain and Field hope you'll do your part to make sure this service is no longer the best-kept secret in agriculture.

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