

# The AgrAbility to make a difference

USDA grant brings national program to Oklahoma

In the land of wheat and cattle, more than 17,000 agricultural workers in Oklahoma live with a disability. No matter the severity, a disability can change the daily routine of farm or ranch work.

Now, Oklahomans have help coping with that change, thanks to a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant establishing the Oklahoma AgrAbility Project.

AgrAbility is a national program that links disabled farmers, ranchers and their families with the resources to allow them to continue working in agriculture. Created in 1991, the program is funded by the USDA. Since its conception, the national program has provided assistance to more than 10,000 farm and ranch families.

“Nationally, there are many services available, and we’re making those available to Oklahomans,” said Rachael Kircher, Oklahoma AgrAbility coordinator.

Within each state program, a land-grant institution co-

operative extension service partners with a nonprofit disability organization that will link the farmer or rancher with the proper assistive resources.

These resources include modifications to current structures or tools, new assistive devices, or financial resources to fund such technology.

In Oklahoma, the partnership consists of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service at Oklahoma State University working side-by-side with Langston University and the Oklahoma Assistive Technology Foundation.

Ray Huhnke, OSU Cooperative Extension agricultural engineer, is one of the project’s directors. Along with Kircher, the OCES provides awareness to Oklahoma families in agriculture, as well as to health-care service agencies and to disability service providers across the state.

“Many agencies aren’t fully aware of the needs in rural communities,” Kircher said. “Without the available re-

sources, whether that be information, technology or financial support, they don’t have the background to provide the assistance that is often needed. Our program will provide education and training to these agencies.”

Each member of the partnership offers a unique component to the AgrAbility program. The Langston University AgrAbility staff, with the help of the university’s physical therapy department, will assist farmers and ranchers in the rehabilitation process.

In addition, they train health-care officials around the state and serve as a resource to small farms through their Small Farmer Outreach Program.

To link Oklahoma’s rural communities with state-of-the-art assistive technology, OCES turned to its nonprofit partner, Oklahoma Assistive Tech-



*A spinal cord injury left Missouri farmer Lashley Garnett confined to a wheelchair. Today, he uses a wheelchair lift to get onto his tractor. (Photo courtesy of Missouri AgrAbility Project)*

nology Foundation, or OkAT, with services provided through Oklahoma ABLE Tech.

ABLE Tech provides farmers with information and with access to and, in some cases, funding for assistive technology.

Linda Jaco, Oklahoma ABLE Tech program manager and Oklahoma AgrAbility Project co-director, said assistive technology in agriculture includes any kind of device, modification or service that allows the disabled to keep working in agriculture. She said a magnitude of services and devices are available and the same solution does not work for everyone.

"The beauty of this program is our ability to provide customized solutions," Jaco said.

OkAT helps people with disabilities by increasing their awareness of assistive technology. The focus of the foundation is to keep the needs of disabled Oklahomans on the forefront. OkAT contributes to the partnership by conducting on-site assessments that provide the farmer with technical advice and options.

Once a solution has been addressed, a database maintained by the national program is used to locate companies that provide the services or products needed to assist the client.

Since the program is in its early stages, the Oklahoma AgrAbility project is working to educate extension specialists, health-care providers and other professionals to act as a referral system for rural citizens with disabilities. These professionals, who are in direct contact with farm families daily, will help identify individuals who would benefit from the program.

"With the program based in Stillwater, there is no way we can effectively locate people in need in rural Oklahoma," Kircher said. "This is a great connection to the people who need help."

Several of Oklahoma's neighboring states have established programs. For example, Missouri has had a program for nine years. In that time, the Missouri AgrAbility program has assisted nearly 300 farmers, ranchers and agricultural workers.

One such farmer is Lashley Garnett of Centertown, Mo. Seven years ago, a spinal cord injury brought Garnett's plans of managing his family's 300-acre farm to a halt. Thinking the way of life he wanted was not possible, Garnett turned to the Missouri AgrAbility program for help. It provided Garnett and his wife with the information and resources needed to modify their home, farming equipment and operation so he could continue farming.

"I knew I wanted to continue farming," Garnett said. "I've picked up the pieces, and I'm back on the farm doing what I enjoyed before my injury."

To accommodate his spinal cord injury, Garnett's farm is now equipped with wheelchair ramps, tractor wheelchair lifts, tractor hand controls and a modified all-terrain vehicle.

"I'm doing what I've always dreamed of doing," Garnett said.

Over time, Oklahoma's program coordinators hope to develop a peer network to allow farmers and ranchers an opportunity to share common concerns and interests. The network will offer support and a listening ear to those who have traveled down similar roads.

"Farmers and ranchers are an extremely proud group," Kircher said. "We want them to know there are others in situations similar to their own."

With 26 percent of Oklahoma farmers and ranchers living with a disability, and the average age of the farmer increasing, the AgrAbility program partners believe there is a direct need for their presence in the state. With lack of information or available financial resources, assistive technology has been limited in rural Oklahoma. Kircher said they hope to change that in the next four years.

"Right now, we want the rural community to know that a disability does not mean an end to a great way of life," Kircher said.

*By Sarah Harris, Tilden, Texas*

*For more information about the Oklahoma AgrAbility Project, call Kircher at (405) 744-2398 or visit the Web site at [agrability.okstate.edu](http://agrability.okstate.edu).*