

# MU Extension Program Helps Disabled Farmers Continue Working

**COLUMBIA, MO.**

**D**ennis Schmitz's life changed in a split second when his coat got caught in a power takeoff on his farm in Parnell, Mo.

The rapidly rotating PTO burned skin off his back and broke his arm in 17 places, along with several ribs, his collarbone and vertebrae in his neck.

Schmitz is one of 120,000 farmers injured each year in what is considered one of the country's most dangerous occupations, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

"When I got hurt, I couldn't do anything and basically I died that day," said Schmitz, 43. After a long rehabilitation, Schmitz contacted specialists at the University of Missouri Extension AgrAbility Project, which works closely with injured and disabled farm workers who want to remain in agriculture.

"The project provides practical education and assistance that promotes independence in agricultural production and rural living," said Willard Downs, project director and MU Extension professor of agricultural engineering.

One AgrAbility service is to provide technical assistance to adapt farm equipment and modify operations and buildings.

Brad Marsh, a technology coordinator on the AgrAbility team, assessed the problems Schmitz faced in continuing to farm.

"I serve as a resource to farmers who have disabling conditions of all types," he said. "My goal is to make sure that they are aware of the options available so they can make an informed choice on what they want to do."

Marsh offered suggestions for increasing Schmitz's access, safety and independence. One solution was to replace a conventional ladder with a spiral staircase around grain bins so he could walk up rather than climb.

Another change Schmitz made was to distribute hog manure through a traveling gun sprinkler system instead of hauling it to fields in a tank wagon.

Farmers and ranchers with disabilities can apply to the Missouri Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (MDVR) for financial help in obtaining assistive technology and equipment modifications that support their ability to continue working in agriculture.

"I hurt every day. I can't lift as much or work as long as I used to, but I would not be farming today without the assistance I received from the MDVR and AgrAbility," Schmitz said.

The Missouri AgrAbility Project, a grant-funded program of the USDA, has assisted Missouri farmers and family members since 1994. For more information on AgrAbility services, call 1-800-995-8503. Δ