



Alberta fire department builds community safety through outreach

By Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

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It's often said that to encourage change, you need to lead by example.

And for the fire department in Alberta's Clearwater County, it's a premise that's not only valued but also practiced.

"Whenever we get an opportunity to educate and engage with the public as a fire department, we always take it because it is our one opportunity where we get to be proactive," says Evan Stewart, assistant fire chief for the Clearwater Regional Fire Rescue Services, which serves 22,000-square kilometres in west-central Alberta.

With a significant portion of the local area consisting of agricultural land, one of the fire department's latest public outreach campaigns focused on the risks of grain entrapment. This past summer, the fire department made use of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association's BeGrainSafe program, which provided firefighters with training on how to safely orchestrate a grain entrapment rescue using simulated situations in a controlled environment, as well as providing an opportunity for public education.

"When it comes to grain entrapment, it is a high-risk, low-frequency occurrence where seconds and minutes count. It may not happen very often, but it is very high-risk and the hazards are very real," explains Evan.

Sadly, many of the department's firefighters know all-too-well of the high risks associated with grain entrapment.

In 2015, three young sisters – 13-year-old and 11-year-old twins – who lived in the local area died when they became buried in canola seed.





“It hit our community pretty hard. It impacts our membership to this day because we have had to deal with the worst-case scenario. The [BeGrainSafe] program certainly helped to provide some of our members with some closure, as well as knowing that the department is taking those proactive steps to deal with those emergencies,” says Evan, adding that the county approached the family of the three girls to ensure they would be comfortable with grain entrapment being put in the local public spotlight.

“The family was appreciative that the county, through the fire department, was being proactive and learning from a horrible tragedy.”

While the BeGrainSafe training, which uses a mobile trailer to simulate an entrapment in flowing grain, was invaluable for the firefighters, Evan points out that the community outreach was equally as important. The public open house portion, which was held during a public market in downtown Rocky Mountain House to optimize visibility, invited people to watch the firefighters practice rescue techniques and learn more about the risks of grain entrapment.

And with great attendance and feedback throughout the public open house, there’s little doubt that the fire department’s outreach is already helping to build a greater sense of awareness in the community regarding grain safety.

“We had hundreds of people attend and had very engaged members of the public asking great questions, saying that they were going to talk to their neighbours about [grain entrapment] because they hadn’t really realized the risks,” explains Evan.

For the Clearwater Regional Fire Rescue Services, grain safety training and outreach is certainly not going to be a one-time occurrence. In addition to keeping a contingent of firefighters up to standards on grain rescue safety and equipment, he says the department will be looking to bring the BeGrainSafe program back in the near future to continue educating the community and change attitudes about grain safety.

“Encouraging a greater sense of safety in the local agriculture industry through education is definitely a priority for our fire department,” says Evan, noting that he has





encouraged other fire departments serving farming communities to use the BeGrainSafe training.

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) is an annual campaign held the third week of March of each year. In 2019, Safe & Strong Farms: Build an AgSafe Canada, takes place March 10 to 16. CASW is presented by Farm Credit Canada. For more information visit agsafetyweek.ca

Cutline Clearwatercounty1: Clearwater Regional Fire Rescue Services prepare for BeGrainSafe training and demonstrations that took place in the heart of Rocky Mountain House. *Photo courtesy of Evan Stewart.*

Cutline Clearwatercounty2: Using the BeGrainSafe mobile unit, firefighters learn how to extract a grain entrapment victim safely and effectively. *Photo courtesy of Evan Stewart.*

Cutline Clearwatercounty3: Firefighters place panels of a grain rescue tube around a volunteer during BeGrainSafe training in Rocky Mountain House. *Photo courtesy of Evan Stewart.*

