

How Do I Know If Farm Noise Is Too Loud?

By Sharon Scofield

During summer harvest and daily chores, you are exposed to many noises around the farm. These noises include tractors, machinery, chain saws, power tools, lawnmowers, and air compressors, to name a few. Recreational activities that can cause noise exposure include ATV's, motorcycles, motor boats, loud music and firearm use. Many agricultural workers like you may be exposed to, and suffer from the effect of loud noises. A NYCAMH study of over 400 farmers across New York State revealed that 7 out of 10 participants had some degree of hearing loss. Continuous exposure over many years can lead to permanent hearing loss, which is caused by damage to the nerves in the inner ear. This hearing damage is often undetected because it is gradual and there is usually no pain involved. Permanent hearing loss can also be caused by a single explosive noise such as a gunshot.

Warning signs of hearing loss may include:

- Ringing or buzzing in your ear after loud noise exposure
- Difficulty understanding soft voices of women or children – not selective hearing
- Difficulty understanding voices in a crowded room with people talking
- Needing to turn up the volume on the TV or radio

Noise around you is too loud if:

- You have to raise your voice over that noise to be understood by someone 3 feet away
- The noise hurts your ears
- The noise makes your ears ring
- You have difficulty hearing for several hours after exposure

Sound is measured in decibels (the loudness or strength of vibration of a sound). Sound levels of 85 decibels or less are considered in the safe noise zone. Below is some common farm equipment with harmful noise levels. These noises would cause you to raise your voice to be heard by someone three feet away. Keep in mind that the louder the noise, the less time you can be exposed to it, before it can damage your hearing.

<u>Equipment</u>	<u>Noise Level</u>	<u>Maximum hours before damage to hearing</u>
• Lawnmowers	90 decibels	8 hours
• Tractors	95-100 decibels	4-2 hours
• Power tools	105 decibels	1 hour
• Chainsaws	110-115 decibels	30 to 15 minutes
• Firearms	Greater than 120 decibels	NONE

There are ways to prevent hearing loss or protect the hearing you have left. You can:

- Move away from the noise source

- Reduce the noise source by repairing loud mufflers, tightening loose chains and bolts, enclosing or isolating noisy equipment
- If you can't move away from or reduce the noise source, you can wear hearing protection

There are things to remember when selecting hearing protection:

- Hearing protectors can be earplugs, sound bands or ear muffs
- Choose protectors that are comfortable, available, and easy for you to use
- Look for the NRR (Noise Reduction Rating) of 24 or higher
- The higher the NRR- the better the protection
- Properly fit the hearing protection
- Hearing protection will allow you to hear normal conversation and your farm equipment, it is designed to block out the loud damaging noise
- Using cotton balls or music headsets in your ears will not block out the loud damaging noises
- Farmers who use hearing protectors around loud noise report less fatigue at the end of the day
- Use hearing protection even if you have a hearing loss, because you will protect the hearing you have remaining

You can purchase low cost hearing protection through our Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Program. Farmers with tax-exempt status can purchase these items and pay no NY State sales tax. Call 800-343-7527 or visit our website at www.nycamh.com.

Please note, NYCAMH is also offering no cost on-farm safety surveys and trainings in New York State through a NYS DOL Hazard Abatement Grant. If you would like an on-farm worker safety training on hearing protection or another farm safety topic, you can contact Jim Carrabba at 800-343-7527, ext. 239 or e-mail Jim at jcarrabba@nycamh.com. A program of Bassett Healthcare Network, NYCAMH is enhancing agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury and illness.