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# The Evolution of Ag Safety

Former ResponsibleAg director recounts the progression of agribusiness workplace safety from afterthought to profession

When Pete Mutschler began his career in ag retail with Tri-County Farmers Cooperative in Sauk City, Wisconsin, in 1986, he wore many hats. So did everyone else at the co-op.

Depending on the season, co-op employees might haul seed and fertilizer, apply crop-protection products or manage the chemical warehouse inventory. Then one day, a new task arose — regulatory compliance. While most in the room sat on their hands, Mutschler raised his.

“The Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act had been passed by Congress, and the co-op needed someone to work with the local emergency planning committee to develop response plans for chemical emergencies, plant fires and other hazards,” he recalls. “It was a milestone for me and set me on the course that defined my career.”

Mutschler eventually joined the staff at CHS Inc. in 1989. For the next 30 years, he dedicated himself to developing and expanding environmental, health and safety (EHS) standards within the agricultural retail sector. Among his noted career accomplishments was helping to develop the



No one plans for an accident to occur, but incident reviews allow facilities to learn where improvements can be made to increase future safety for employees and communities alike.

ResponsibleAg Certification Program, which launched in 2014 with the goal of helping agribusinesses ensure compliance with EHS and security regulations to increase safety for employees, customers and communities.

## Building a safety profession

Even though there were some great safety professionals working for agriculture companies when Mutschler started his career, he says no one considered themselves to be an “ag safety professional.”

“Even though agriculture has always been a dangerous occupation, safety training as we know it now was just in its infancy in those days,” says Mutschler, who retired as Environmental, Health and Safety Director at CHS in December 2019. “Some organizations had talented people who cared about the safety of the products their companies handled, but it was all volunteer. No one was paid to do ‘safety.’”

Thanks to informal training from those who wrote the original rules for ammonia safety and relationships forged through membership in the National Safety Council, Mutschler built his resume as an “ag safety professional.”

## Creating a safety program

When the industry decided to create the ResponsibleAg Certification Program in 2014, Mutschler once again had his hand in the air. He served on the founding board of directors for five years.

“I truly believed in it right from the start,” he says. “Having an accredited audit system shows that you’re a good player in the neighborhood. It’s one thing to ask a community to trust you, but when you hang up a sign that says you’re a participant in ResponsibleAg and that your facility is certified, that carries a lot of weight. That says we’re professionals. We do this right.”



PETE MUTSCHLER  
Founding ResponsibleAg board member

He notes that ResponsibleAg also led to an increase in community outreach at CHS, including facility tours for local emergency response agencies and training for emergencies such as grain-bin rescues or accidental ammonia releases. “Such efforts show that we’re a partner in those community services, not just a user of those services,” he adds.

During his time at CHS, Mutschler says ResponsibleAg helped bring consistency to compliance audits across the co-op’s numerous locations. The established standards eliminated findings based solely on individual auditor “pet peeves” and allowed for apples-to-apples comparisons.

“This let me focus my energy on those locations that weren’t taking it seriously, as well as give recognition to the outstanding performers,” he says.

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– Pete Mutschler



By participating in ResponsibleAg, CHS increased its community outreach efforts, including safety training for local emergency responders, such as this ammonia release training event.



Earning ResponsibleAg certification isn’t easy, but when a location completes the process, Mutschler says employees should take pride in the accomplishment.

“That would get our people excited about doing the right thing.”

## Converting participation to certification

Mutschler still keeps a hand in the ag retail sector by volunteering his time with the American Society of Safety Professionals. He hopes the industry continues to strive to increase the number of certified ResponsibleAg locations, and he challenges agribusiness leaders to place more value on the program within their organizations.

“We have lots of participants, but only about half of them have taken it all the way to certification,” he says. “The key in the future is to get everyone in the industry involved in this and to recognize how important it is — essentially consider it a condition of doing business. I think ResponsibleAg is the first step in showing that you deserve to survive into the future. Safety is way too sensitive a topic to not show that you can do it right.”

To learn more about ResponsibleAg, visit [www.ResponsibleAg.org](http://www.ResponsibleAg.org) or call 270.683.6777.

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## MISSION

ResponsibleAg is an industry-led initiative **committed** to helping agribusinesses properly store and handle farm input supplies. The program helps members ensure they are **compliant** with environmental, health, safety and security regulations to keep employees, customers and our communities **safe**.

