Farmers receive health services through Agrisafe-N.C.

By Doug Boyd and Christine Neff

It was almost lunchtime at an agricultural meeting, and about the only sound one might have heard when a call went out for subjects to do a respirator fit-test was stomachs growling. “I’m hungry,” said Walton Aycock as he stood up to volunteer and move the morning along.

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The meeting at the Duplin County Cooperative Extension Service building in Kenansville was for farmers, agribusiness workers and others involved in turkey production. Robin Tutor, interim director of the N.C. Agromedicine Institute, was there talking about respiratory health and its importance in a business where avian flu could strike at any moment.

“It’s your health you’re protecting or not protecting,” Tutor told the crowd.

Tutor’s presentation was part of a new institute program called AgriSafe-North Carolina. Its focus is occupational health, primary care and preventive care among the state’s agricultural workers.

“We all enjoy farmers’ products every day. We eat them; we wear them. These people provide us with so much, so we need to serve our farmers in return,” Tutor said.

The Agromedicine Institute, established in 1999 by the UNC Board of Governors, is a partnership of East Carolina University, N.C. State University and N.C. A&T State University. Through AgriSafe, the institute partners with Tri-County Community Health Council, based in Newton Grove, to provide health screenings and follow-up services for farmers, their families and non-migrant farm workers. AgriSafe provides services at the Carolina Oaks Health Center in Four Oaks or at other spots convenient for the individual such as a farm, agribusiness or extension office.

Carolina Oaks is open five days a week. Evening and weekend appointments at the clinic or in the community are also available. Fees vary depending on services received and where services are rendered. AgriSafe provides many services free or at reduced cost.

“We want to be as accessible as possible,” Tutor said.

Approximately 27 percent of the state’s agricultural families do not have health insurance, according to research by the Agromedicine Institute and the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Many farmers must choose between paying for farm operations and paying for health insurance, which can cost as much as $500 to $1,200 each. If farmers do visit a doctor’s office, physicians may not consider the unique occupational hazards they face, such as
skin cancer, respiratory illness, arthritis and occupational stress, Tutor said.

AgriSafe is staffed by a family nurse practitioner, community outreach worker and family advocate. Services include health care with an emphasis on agricultural exposures, as well as education to prevent illness and injury on the farm. Staff can help identify resources for affordable dental care, medications, diabetic supplies and dealing with family challenges. Farmers can also select and be fitted with personal protective equipment such as respirators, safety glasses, hearing protection and chemical-resistant clothing to prevent injury and illness.

To help get the word out, Tutor and others staffed AgriSafe booths at September’s Peanut Festival in Dublin, Coats’ Farmers Day in October and the Touchstone Cotton Festival in Dunn in November. Following the turkey producers meeting, Tutor returned to Kenansville in March for a chicken producers meeting.

AgriSafe is a “one-stop shop,” Tutor said. “We want to look at the farm family’s total well-being, not just their physical well-being. We want to address the whole person. And we recognize that farmers have unique demands on their time and resources.”

Tutor grew up dressing chickens and doing other chores on a family farm in Orange County. Family members farm in Wake and Johnston counties, and her son and daughter-in-law live on a farm in Duplin County. She’s trained as an occupational therapist and has a master’s of public health degree. Before joining the Agromedicine Institute in 2007, her career included working with health programs for migrant farm worker children and families.

“It’s very much a part of me,” she said of agriculture.

The AgriSafe Network started in Iowa, where it has been successful in reducing health insurance claims costs for farmers. A $100,000 grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust funded the one-year pilot program in eastern North Carolina, targeting Bladen, Columbus, Cumberland, Duplin, Harnett, Johnston, Pender, Robeson, Sampson and Wayne counties. Tutor has applied for a $1.9 million grant from the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund in collaboration with the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service and N.C. Agricultural Foundation and plans to apply for matching funds from other foundations and agribusinesses to keep the program going.

In Kenansville, government workers and people who serve or work in the turkey industry were the primary audience for Tutor’s presentation on avian flu. Getting people at that level involved is important for spreading information about the disease, health and safety in general, and about AgriSafe, said James Parsons, poultry specialist with Duplin County Cooperative Extension.

“I think of lot of them take things for granted,” said Parsons, who admitted that in his 30-plus years in the industry he hasn’t always worn a respirator when walking inside a poultry house. “They say, ‘It’s never bothered me, so I’m going to keep on doing like I’m doing.’”

Aycock, who works for Goldsboro Milling, a turkey processing company, said he wears a respirator every day at work, and having it fit properly and getting reminders of the importance of protecting one’s health are important.

“I think it’s good for growers in keeping healthy, staying healthy,” he said.

Nearby, medical assistant and community outreach worker Karen Sirucek stayed busy performing blood pressure and blood sugar tests at the Kenansville meeting. She said unbalanced diets with lots of fat and cholesterol contribute to high blood pressure, diabetes and other health problems among farmers and farm workers.

“They have bacon for breakfast, pork chops for supper and a ham sandwich for lunch,” she said, as caterers across the room took the cover off a tray of inch-thick barbecued chops. But the AgriSafe message is getting across.

“They’re starting to warm up to us,” Sirucek said of farmers and agribusinesses in the region. “They’re calling us and asking, ‘Hey, can you come do this for us?’ We’re here to serve them and their needs.”