

Moving in the right directions

Freeport-based consultant Cynthia Flores helps farmers and their workers reduce injuries that cost the U.S. about \$11.3 billion annually.



Cynthia Flores demonstrates a move to test spinal flexibility during a seminar Thursday at the annual State of Maine Agricultural Trades Show in the Augusta Civic Center. Flores' company Labor-Movement helps workers in labor-intensive jobs reduce injuries and extend their work life.



Flores demonstrates how to use your legs to lift heavy objects during Thursday's seminar. Flores says people who work in agriculture should "take an athlete's attitude" in their jobs. "You're all athletes – you're just wearing overalls," she told the group.

BY KELLEY BOUCHARD PORTLAND PRESS HERALD

AUGUSTA — Cynthia Flores worked on Maine farms for two decades, wrangling dairy cows,

growing vegetables and tending turkeys.

Now, she works with farm owners and employees across the country, teaching them how to avoid the physical wear and tear she knows is all too common in U.S. fields, barns and production plants. It's a real problem, with over 21,000 agricultural injuries tallied in 2022 that resulted in lost work days and a national cost of about \$11.3 billion annually, federal agencies report.

At the 2025 Maine Agricultural Trades Show on Thursday, the Freeport-based body mechanics and farmwork expert demonstrated how to move safely and avoid injury whether picking potatoes, hoisting livestock or lugging crates of corn at farmers markets.

“You are all athletes — you're just wearing overalls,” Flores told about 50 participants. “Whatever part you have in farming, taking an athlete's attitude toward work will improve your performance and reduce the potential for injury.”

Flores is a certified personal trainer and licensed massage therapist who last year worked with over 900 farmers in 18 states and British Columbia through her company, Labor-Movement. Her training manual, “Athletes in Overalls: Field Moves,” shows how people in labor-intensive jobs can help reduce injury and extend their work life.

In 2023, about 2.3 million U.S. workers were employed in agriculture and related industries, including about 11,000 farmworkers in Maine. Nearly 60% are age 55 or older, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention.

A recent study for the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that about 81% of surveyed poultry and pork production line workers are at high risk for musculoskeletal disorders as a result of rapid and repeated tasks. Poultry workers in particular are twice as likely as the average American worker to suffer a severe wrist injury, and seven times more likely to develop carpal tunnel syndrome.

Through her own research, Flores found that 70% of nearly 500 farmers she surveyed had experienced musculoskeletal injuries, including many that occurred because previous injuries hadn't fully healed before the employees returned to work. She noted that just 50% of adults in the general population reported similar injuries, according to the CDC.

In Maine, farmers reported at least four amputations and several other severe injuries in 2024, according to Barrett Parks, a safety management consultant with The MEMIC Group, a Portland-based provider of workers' compensation insurance nationwide.

In response to the frequency of agricultural injuries, MEMIC has launched an educational campaign to help farmers reduce injuries, Parks said. He delivered two sparsely attended seminars during this week's trade show.

A part-time farmer who lives in Woodland, in Aroostook County, Parks understands that time, money, weather and other challenges can keep farmers from proactively addressing the potential for accidents, including falls, electrocutions, impalements, equipment malfunctions and chemical exposures.

“I put in 40 to 50 hours a week (with MEMIC), then I’m working at my farm until dark,” Parks said. “At the end of the day, time is short, people take short cuts.”

Making worker safety a top priority would help farmers avoid the higher costs of handling an employee’s injury or death, including lost production, difficulty replacing skilled workers and the personal toll of losing a valued co-worker, friend or family member, Parks said.

Flores encouraged farmers to ask workers about injuries and provide physical training for healthy movement, along with eating well, staying hydrated and getting plenty of rest. All farmworkers should make sure they’re moving in healthy ways, she said. But she admits she didn’t pay attention to how her body was affected when she was farming.

“In farming we don’t talk enough about injury,” said Flores, whose presentation was hosted by the Maine Federation of Farmers Markets. “It’s not that I didn’t care. I didn’t know better. I didn’t know I had a choice in how to move.”

Lorelei Cimeno, 31, co-owner of Rainbow Farm, a poultry and vegetable producer in Orland, near Bucksport, appreciated the instruction Flores provided. She planned to bring it back to the farm, where she has four employees, and incorporate healthy movement training into the regular work schedule.

“It’s very important because we rely on our bodies for work,” Cimeno said. “If anybody gets injured, it’s a big loss personally because nobody wants to get hurt, but it’s also a big loss for the business. We’re already so busy, but in the long run, if you can prevent an injury, it’s worth it.”

Kelley Bouchard — 207-791- 6328
kbouchard@pressherald.com