



## **Season 2 Episode 13 – Mental Health in Agriculture**

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Speaker 1:

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast, your trusted information source for Alabama Agriculture.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Alabama Crops Report Podcast. I'm Katelyn Kesheimer.

Adam Rabinowitz:

And I'm Adam Rabinowitz, an extension economist at Auburn University and with Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

I forgot to say I'm an Extension Entomologist but it's been a while since we've been in the studio together, Adam.

Adam Rabinowitz:

That's right, it has been. But you know what, it's a nice time to kind of start reflecting a little bit on where things are and where we're going in life.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Mm-hmm. Absolutely. And a lot of that starts with mental health. And today we have a special guest. We have Liz Mooneyham, and she is the Program Coordinator of A Healthy You, A Healthy Farm at the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries. Liz, welcome to the podcast.

Liz Mooneyham:

Thank you for having me.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So Liz, when we have new guests on the show, we like to introduce them to the podcast and our audience with a fun fact. So if there's something you'd like to share with us and our audience of the Crops Report Podcast, go ahead.

Liz Mooneyham:

Yeah, so my fun fact is I went to Auburn, graduated with agricultural business and economics degree with minor in rural community development, still local to Auburn, and planning on coming back and getting my Masters in a little bit. But when I'm not working, I enjoy being outside. I love to read, love to hike, all that kind of fun stuff.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Fantastic. And Auburn and Alabama are great for all of those. And so today here we're talking about a really important topic, it's mental health and specifically the program that you're in charge of, Healthy You, A Healthy Farm, at the Department of Agriculture and Industries. Can you talk a little bit about what this initiative is and where it started?

Liz Mooneyham:

We started a little over a year ago. So the USDA allotted the Department of Ag in our state, \$500,000 to address the stigma around mental health in the Ag community. So that's a lot of money and that's a big task. So through this program, we are hoping to provide outreach from an Ag standpoint in mental health to reach a community that hasn't been reached before. So we're doing that by providing suicide prevention trainings as well as access to resources that already exist in our state.

Adam Rabinowitz:

So I have to say, I think that the name A Healthy You, A Healthy Farm is just an excellent perspective of saying that you need to put yourself first. You need to take care of yourself before you can take care of the farm. And I think that's really important for agricultural producers as they think about what this ultimately means in this type of program. So what are the goals that you're looking at in terms of this initiative and how have they changed since that program's inception?

Liz Mooneyham:

I'll go back a little bit. So the first few months that we had this funding, that was a big thinking period for us of how do we go about this? I mean, this mental health is such a vast topic and we only have a certain amount of time that how can we figure out how to cover as much ground in as little time as possible? So when we were creating those goals, it was how do we get resources for mental health in the hands of Alabama farmers? That has been goal number one and that has not changed.

But how we go about those goals, that has changed a lot. So from the time that I was hired on for this project in about September of last year to December was that planning period of, "Okay, what do we do? This has never been done before. Other states have the same opportunity to do this, but it's been slow moving across the board. How do we get this started?"

So we have come up with the idea of training folks who maybe interact with your average farmer on a daily basis in suicide prevention and crisis intervention skills. So you're not going to be anyone's therapist, you're not going to be a counselor, but we want to equip people who are already in the communities in lifesaving skills.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So this might be for people who may not realize the power they have with some of their peers to help them, even though, like you said, they're not therapists, but just some key skills to really help look out for one another.

Liz Mooneyham:

Yeah, exactly. I mean, mental health resource access in our state is, I mean, there's a lot to be desired. I think realistic for us to say that we are not going to come in on a white horse and save the day. But if what we can do is equip your extension agents and inspectors and your church family and these communities overlap in rural Alabama. So if we can convince and train the people who are already there in suicide prevention, that I think is what's going to be the most effective in the long run.

Adam Rabinowitz:

And I think that's important to recognize. The American Farm Bureau has also been doing some research in this area on farmer stress and they've identified some of those key players within the people in your community or your friends or your family members as being those that are available and able to talk to about some of these issues.

Liz Mooneyham:

One day I had a panel that I was speaking on and I was asking a farmer, "Tell me about some of your stressful times." He was an older gentleman so he was there for the crash in the '80s. And I said, "Tell me about some of these stressful times. Tell me about how you got through it." He said, "There's not a day in my life that is not stressful. Every single day for me is stressful and I don't know how to manage it and I'm 73 years old." So that outreach, I mean, it's right there. We can help.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

So it sounds like you've been out in the community and reaching out to some of these growers. How has it been received when they hear about this program and the available resources you guys have?

Liz Mooneyham:

So far it's been received really well. Starting the conversation has been the most rewarding part of this process so far because the more we found that we talk about it, the more people want to talk. I was at a trade show back in February and I was there with the Department of Agriculture, and so I would have people come up all day long and they would see what A Healthy You, Healthy Farm was about, sprint in the other direction. And so this happened and a couple come up and the husband, saw what my stuff was about, immediately darted away. But then his wife stayed, she lingered a little bit and she said, "I'm going to take some of these resources because I really worry about him and he doesn't really talk about what he's feeling." And so that reception is sometimes quiet but it's there, which is very encouraging.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, that's fantastic is yeah, you gave them a safe space with some resources that they can use. That's great.

Adam Rabinowitz:

And it really is about starting the conversation because that's how we're going to get past that stigma with mental health that's just very apparent in the community.

Liz Mooneyham:

Right, you can't have one without the other.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Yeah, absolutely.

Adam Rabinowitz:

And I think some of it is a generational issue as well. As we look at our current youth and what they're exposed to and the resources that are there, even within our school systems, it's very different than what it was. So it is something that's important to start that conversation and to help people know what those resources are that are available. So beyond the trade shows that you mentioned, where else and what other type of outreach is the program doing?

Liz Mooneyham:

Our main probably product that we produce is suicide prevention trainings. So what we've done, we go across the state. I think we've done trainings in maybe eight or nine counties so far, multiple in some of those counties. And we train people who would like to be trained in suicide prevention and crisis intervention. So what we've

done is we partner with the Alabama Department of Mental Health on this. So we use their certified trainers, and then I work with them one on one to give it more of an Ag focus.

So a lot of people who attend these trainings aren't farmers themselves but interact with farmers on a daily basis. Like I said earlier, extension agents, inspectors, soil and water conservation, those kind of people. And we give it an Ag focus so it is applicable to their day to day job. So some examples of that. We've had a training where we've used a farmer suicide note as an example of what someone might be going through, but not be able to say. So that is our main, I guess, product of the program. And so far, we've trained 210 people across the State of Alabama over 47 different organizations or companies in suicide prevention that weren't trained at the beginning of this year. And I think that makes a huge difference over time.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Absolutely. Yeah, that's a great number. And so if farmers or their peers want to get involved, what's a good way to find out more about the Healthy You, Healthy Farm program?

Liz Mooneyham:

The easiest way is to visit our website, [agi.alabama.gov/HYHF](http://agi.alabama.gov/HYHF) that has all the information that we provide at our training. So access to resources digitally, as well as a signup box to be able to sign up for updates about upcoming trainings.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Liz, some of our listeners might be skeptical about mental health issues and the serious issues we have with high suicide rates in the agricultural community. Can you give us a little bit background on that and why these initiatives are so important?

Liz Mooneyham:

Agriculture as an occupation is one of the highest rates of suicide in the country. So even though it isn't talked about, I think most of us know someone that has been affected by this crisis. And so what we want to do is validate that. Like I said earlier, there's farmers that have been stressed every day of their lives, and what we want to do is validate that, say that that is okay, and get you every resource in our power to be able to connect you with people that can help. So whether that is a mental health resource or not, we want to be there to say that that is okay to have financial stressors or family stressors or your own mental health struggles. I think that validation has been key and is what is going to make the difference in this in the future.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Thanks, Liz. That's a great summary of what y'all provide. And to reiterate to our listeners, if anyone out there is struggling or knows someone who is struggling and wants access to resources, can you just repeat where you can find all those resources, Liz?

Liz Mooneyham:

Yeah. So you can find them on our website, [agi.alabama.gov/HYHF](http://agi.alabama.gov/HYHF). But there you'll find access to all the resources that we have come together with the Department of Mental Health to make a list of. And then also, your national crisis hotline number is now 988. They've shortened it down to just three numbers.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

And that can be used similar to a 911 for emergencies.

Liz Mooneyham:

Exactly.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

For mental health emergencies. We can call 988.

Liz Mooneyham:

Mm-hmm.

Adam Rabinowitz:

That is very true and that can be used for text or phone to actually reach a counselor who can help somebody through that crisis.

Katelyn Kesheimer:

Well, that's all great information. And Liz, thank you so much for sharing all your resources and knowledge on this important topic. As always, if we can be of any help, whether it's farm, agribusiness or mental health related, please don't hesitate to give us a call.

Speaker 1:

The Alabama Crops Report Podcast is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and is sponsored by Alabama Ag Credit.