

# Plan for the Worst

Preparation for a potential lawsuit or disease outbreak could mitigate the fallout if a crisis hits.

BY CLAIRE VATH | PHOTOS BY JAYSON KORTHUIS



The dairy's electricity blinks off ... then back on. Then off again. "We're in the middle of a small windstorm," explains Rich Appel, excusing himself to power on the backup generator so the cows can resume this morning's milking. An inconvenience, sure, but one Appel shrugs off as minor, temporary.

What's not temporary, however, is the increased scrutiny farmers

and producers face about the way they choose to run their operations. Thanks to lightning-fast technology coupled with "peer journalism," it's more difficult than ever for farmers to isolate themselves on their operations, solely concerned with the weather or the daily tasks at hand.

Appel farms in Whatcom County, Washington, where farmers are a bit on edge these days as state environmentalists and lawyers seek to change dairy-industry practices. At a recent local dairy federation meeting, "rumors swirled that lawsuits were coming the way of our dairymen," Appel says. "The question was posed: 'If you had a lawsuit land on your desk tomorrow, what would you do?' Three-quarters of the people in that room said they'd sell out."

What would you do if your operation got hit with a groundwater contamination suit, if an E. coli outbreak originated on your feedlot or an employee injured himself on-site?

Whether you're a small family farm, a 10,000-acre producer or an agribusiness owner, experts agree you need to formulate a solid crisis communications plan well before you need it.

**THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE.** Appel and other dairy farmers reached out

to Gerald Baron, executive director of Whatcom Family Farmers and longtime crisis consultant, who works to provide a unified voice and imbue communications expertise to the region's 400 farmers.

"Farmers by nature are not oriented toward engaging in the public sphere," Baron says. "It really conflicts with who they are ... independent workers who keep their heads down and do their work."

But, he concedes, "we're seeing concerted legal, political and public attacks on farmers and their livelihoods ... and farmers need to learn to stand up for themselves." That's why he offers crisis communications seminars for farmers.

After a Seattle news station ran a piece depicting farmers as polluting the water and wrecking the environment—"an outrage-type piece," Appel says—Baron coached the local farming community on dealing with media.

"We needed some training, because how do you respond to media that show up in your front yard?" Appel asks. "[Baron] helped us create the message we wanted out there, to be truthful and be able to defend ourselves," Appel explains. "We didn't feel like we were being defended." ▶



Rich Appel

## Creating a Crisis Plan

Eileen Wixted founded Wixted and Company, in Iowa, a strategic communications firm that focuses on media training and crisis management for a wide variety of clients, including agribusinesses. Here are the questions she suggests farmers consider well before the news media comes knocking at their doors.

### ► What are the top four to six things that could ruin your business?

“Sit down at a kitchen table or around the conference table and ask yourselves, if those things happen, what’s my operational plan?” Wixted says.

### ► What’s your operational response?

For instance, she says, if there’s a manure spill on the farm, your operational response should be: “One: Stop the spill; two: Clean it up; and three: Report it.”

### ► What’s your communications response?

Determine with whom you should share your information—employees, customers, stakeholders, neighbors, the media. “Our ability to think and put strategies in place has really collapsed with the internet,” Wixted says. “People will share good news, and they will absolutely share our bad news, and they can share it instantly via social media.”

### ► Who will communicate and how?

Wixted sees two types of clients—those who put a preventive plan in place and those who don’t. With her proactive clients, Wixted brings a leadership team together to help define what a crisis looks like—an injury or death, an incendiary news story or an environmental lawsuit. Then they identify situations they’re likely to face, unknowns in the business, who’s on the leadership team, who they’ll

communicate with and when. After that discovery and understanding phase, she says, “we create messaging and drill the communications team, then we put the plan to bed and revisit it each year.”

**TELLING A GOOD STORY.** In his crises seminars, coupled with the articles he writes on the topic, Baron tells farmers the typical PR (public relations) answer, “stay on the positive and defend yourself,” is ineffective.

He tells farmers to look toward the offense rather than defense. “It’s a real challenge, but we need to actively show that our farming practices are safe and the things we’re doing to head off crises,” he says. “Credibility is everything, so being completely honest in telling your story is essential.”

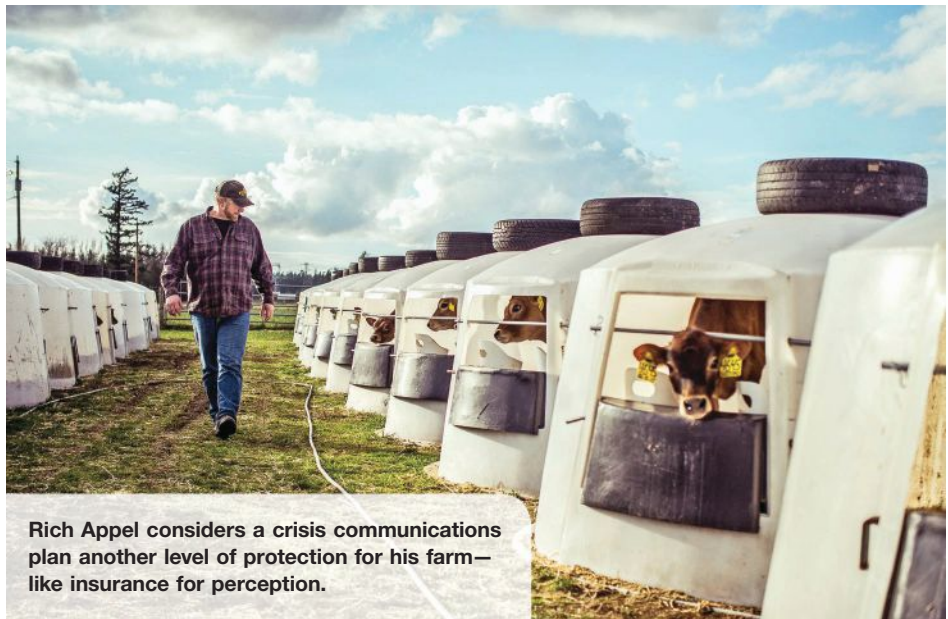
In the case of the Seattle station’s story, for instance, the message Whatcom County farmers put out is that they actively work toward best dairy and environmental practices. “We have 100,000 acres of farmland in our county,” Baron says. “It’s a tremendously important filter for the enormous amounts of rain we get each year. Our farmland helps restore habitat for wildlife and fish, too, and if you force our farmers out and convert that farmland to developments, that’s where the real environmental problems come in.”

Appel wants his farm around for generations. His father came to this country and built a dairy and cheese-making enterprise from the ground up, and at 50, Appel still very much wants to be part of that. So Appel makes it a point to keep talking. “We’re open with everyone—even those who don’t like us—trying to find common ground,” he says.

And, thanks to Baron’s work, Appel Farms has somewhat of a preventive crisis communications plan. “We know who to contact, who’s going to be doing the talking, etc.,” he says.

Adds Wixted: “I’ve found that our ag clients are very eager to do the right thing. They tend to accept responsibility and talk about putting solutions in place because that speaks to their integrity. In today’s environment,” she concludes, “developing a crisis communications plan before you need it is just good business sense.” ●

As a seasoned crisis communications expert, Gerald Baron writes extensively on agriculture and other crises, offering free tips and advice. Check out his blogs and articles at [www.crisisblogger.com](http://www.crisisblogger.com) and [www.emergencymgmt.com/emergency-blogs/crisis-comm](http://www.emergencymgmt.com/emergency-blogs/crisis-comm).



**Rich Appel considers a crisis communications plan another level of protection for his farm—like insurance for perception.**