

'Everything Got Very Real, Very Quickly': How Quick Actions and Rescue Training Averted a Grain Bin Tragedy

Byline: Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

It's well-known that grain entrapments can happen alarmingly fast. But just how fast is often hard to comprehend.

Graham Burden has had the unfortunate first-hand experience of witnessing the speed of a grain entrapment on his farm. But quick actions, first responder training, and an incredibly fortunate sequence of events prevented the scary incident from becoming a heartbreaking tragedy.

May 6, 2026, started out as a fairly typical day on Burden's 3,000-acre family farm located north of Loughheed in east-central Alberta. Burden, a fourth-generation farmer, and a worker, Aaron Dingle, were working that day to remove spoiled canola from a bin. Eighteen-year-old Dingle, who is from New Zealand, came to the Burden family farm via an informal work exchange.

"We used to be part of an exchange program in the '80s and '90s," says Burden, "and while we're not part of that program anymore, we still have the opportunity to host workers periodically when people who have worked with us previously refer us."

After a sample from the canola bin was a "little bit suspect," they had been using a grain vac to remove spoiled canola at the top, with the grain further down still in good condition. As they drew closer to the bottom of the bin, after a couple of truckloads of grain were taken out, Burden says the plan was to go in the bin and catch spoiled grain as it made its way down to the auger.

"I'd been in there myself the day before, and so I knew how vulnerable a position it is," explains Burden.

That awareness is what prompted Burden to talk safety to Dingle, who was staying with him, on the drive to the farm that morning.

"I was telling him 'Okay, this is how people get in trouble so you really have to be careful.' We knew that you don't want to get into a perilous position in the bin, but we'd both be in there. I told him that if he gets into trouble, I'd help him," Burden says.

Dingle, wearing work boots that were loosely laced, was already at the bin when Burden returned from getting his rubber boots from the barn.

Those work boots would end up being pivotal to Dingle's ability to later walk out of the bin.

When every second matters

It wasn't long before Dingle called out that he was stuck knee-deep in canola.

"In hindsight, he was likely stuck because those big boot tops were splayed open and full of grain. So, you could push them down but not pull them up," Burden says.

In the five seconds it took Burden to climb up the rope ladder to ask his father to shut off the auger, Dingle had sunk up to his armpits in the canola. Deciding to climb out and shut off the auger since he could not reach his father, who had briefly gone to the other side to check on the trailers of grain, Burden had just thrown a leg out of the bin's top port when he heard the auger stall out.

And when he turned around, Dingle had gone under the grain.

"Then everything got very real, very quickly," says Burden. "Because this kid has stalled the auger and his head is completely under the grain, so I knew we'd have to do a big rescue. It's nerve-racking how fast it happened."

Asked what went through his mind when Dingle was engulfed in grain, Burden says he didn't have a chance to think about what was happening.

"You don't have any time to hem and haw about coming up with a plan," he explains. "You just jump in there and start doing what you can to get him out."

While his father called emergency services, Burden got to work trying to remove grain from where Dingle went under.

"He's the lowest point in the bin, so every time I would move a shovel full of grain away, 10 more shovels worth would slide down from above. It's lucky we had the shovels in there because I don't know how I could have done that initial extraction without some tools."

After a brief period of "desperate shovelling," Burden managed to get Dingle's face exposed. Burden then used several shovels that were in the bin to create a dam around Dingle to prevent the grain from going back on his face and then continued to use his hands to paddle grain away.

"By the time I got his head uncovered, his sinuses were completely full of canola," explains Burden.

"Imagine not being able to move at all, not even being able to move your neck, and you have your nose point upwards to get your last breath and then just getting flooded with canola kernels."

When his breathing relaxed, Dingle told him that his toes were stinging. Burden watched him closely to ensure he wasn't going into shock or losing a lot of blood below the grain. Burden says he was also still aware of the stalled auger. And though it wasn't known at the time, it turned out that Dingle's loose boot had a benefit: it was pulled off his foot and caused the auger to stall.

"In the end, that boot, when he got pulled down to the auger, it spared him losing a limb," Burden says.

Once it was clear that Dingle wasn't in immediate distress, Burden focused on keeping him calm by chatting with him until first responders arrived.

And that's how Joe Knievel, fire chief for the Killam Fire Station, which is part of the Flagstaff Regional Emergency Services Society, found them.

"When I saw the page come through, it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up because it said something about entrapment," says Knievel. "Thankfully, when we got there, our patient was trapped with just his face exposed but he was breathing and quite calm, which helped the situation."

Grain rescue training and equipment make the difference

While the incident took place in another fire department's jurisdiction, Knievel explains that Killam was immediately called since they have grain rescue equipment and had hosted the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association's BeGrainSafe firefighter training in 2022.

When the grain rescue equipment arrived, fire crews quickly passed up panels to the bin where Knievel and others set them up around Dingle, creating a coffer dam. A small auger was then used to extract grain from inside the dam, enabling Dingle to climb out of the tube and then out of the bin.

The entire rescue took less than an hour, which Knievel says is largely due to having grain rescue equipment available and previous BeGrainSafe rescue training.

"Without the training and without the equipment, it would be very difficult, in my opinion, to do a grain entrapment rescue. They were essential for this," Knievel explains.

"The training ensures that you know what to do and what not to do. For example, it's important to know where to cut a bin open if you need to that. You never want to cut below the patient's feet because then you will drag them deeper. In this case, below the patient's feet was just about the bottom of the bin because he was essentially standing on top of the auger."

Fortunately, Dingle only had relatively minor injuries, with his stinging toes being the result of losing the skin from the pads of two toes from a startlingly close encounter with the auger. After an overnight hospital stay, he has since gone home to New Zealand to continue his recovery, but has told Burden, who keeps in touch with him, that he would like to return to help with the fall harvest.

Considering that many grain entrapments do not have such successful outcomes — [Canadian Agricultural Injury Reporting data](#) lists asphyxiation from grain or soil as one of the top 10 causes of fatal agriculture-related injuries between 2011 and 2020 — it is not lost on those involved that the situation could have ended much differently.

"A lot of things aligned that day to make that frightening incident have a positive outcome," Knievel says.

Adds Burden, "It was an incredible sequence of events. Had any of the factors been a little different, like if the grain had been a little deeper, it could have been a very different outcome. People rarely survive entrapments and so for this scary situation to have such a positive outcome was just incredible."

While Burden hopes that no one on their farm is ever again in that sort of situation, he also hopes that the incident helps others realize the speed of entrapments and vulnerability when working around grain.

"There are people who might think that grain safety is just a theoretical concept, but when you realize or when you see how perilous it is, it's alarming for sure," says Burden. "Going through something like that, it really rattles you."

With grain entrapments being a risk anywhere grain is stored, Knievel says he would encourage other fire departments to consider taking the BeGrainSafe grain rescue training, noting that he has already reached out to the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association about hosting the training again next year.

"If you're in a rural community, do the training, get the equipment," stresses Knievel. "We've had this equipment for four years, and after this one rescue, I consider it paid for and absolutely worthwhile. I just hope we never have to use it again."

About the BeGrainSafe Program

The BeGrainSafe program is a grain safety initiative of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association. In 2026, BeGrainSafe Week takes place August 10-16 and is presented by Corteva Agriscience. The program is also supported by G3, CN, Farm Credit Canada, Agriculture Financial Services Corporation, Alberta Canola Producers Commission, Alberta Grains, Canadian Canola Growers Association, Nutrien Ag Solutions, SaskOilseeds, Saskatchewan Wheat Development Commission, Bunge, Grain Farmers of Ontario, Manitoba Canola Growers Association, and Prairie Oat Growers Association. For more information about BeGrainSafe, visit www.casa-acsa.ca/BeGrainSafe.

About the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

The Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health and safety of farmers, their families and agricultural workers. CASA is funded in part by the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. For more information, visit www.casa-acsa.ca.

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Photo 1

Caption: First responders found Graham Burden with Aaron Dingle in the grain bin and a makeshift shovel dam around Dingle to keep canola from again engulfing his face. Burden had set up the shovels after using his hands to uncover Dingle's face. (Photo supplied by Joe Knievel)

Photo 2

Caption: A loosely-tied work boot ended up saving Aaron Dingle's limb, and maybe more, when it was pulled off his foot and stalled the auger when he became entrapped in grain. (Photo supplied by Joe Knievel)