



Doug DeGross feels "blessed" that he came away from a silage pile collapse with a broken back and nothing more serious.



The pile that "got" DeGross was picture perfect, he says. In fact, he'd taken this picture just minutes before it collapsed on him.

PHOTO: DOUG DEGROSS

Surviving A Silage Avalanche

Collapsing pile was a "huge surprise," says Doug DeGross

by Fae Holin

It started out as a typical day for dairy nutritionist Doug DeGross. He'd pulled up to a client's corn silage pile for a forage sample, bucket and pitchfork in hand. After filling the bucket, he turned to walk back to his pickup to mix and core a sample.

"The sun basically went out – I couldn't see any light and the feed hit me on my head and covered me completely," says DeGross, Tulare, CA. "I knew what was happening before I hit the ground. The entire face fell on me ... about 20 tons broke away."

DeGross, who'd celebrated his 36th birthday with his wife and two toddlers two days before Aug. 27 last summer, was caught in a silage avalanche.

"I knew that I did not want to die there and was able to brush feed from my face in seconds. I landed on my back but with my left arm underneath. I was in severe pain, not only

because of my back, but also because of my feet. Picture lying on your back and having somebody pushing your feet down, the bottoms touching ground," he explains.

A nearby dairy employee ended up uncovering DeGross, grabbing his arms and pulling him from the pile.

Although he didn't know it then, the nutritionist had broken his back, would make two trips and spend 12 days in the hospital, wear a back brace for 58 days and have blood clotting issues because of his injuries.

At the accident site, the farm manager and owner hurried over, offered to take DeGross to the hospital and had his pickup, which was partially buried and dented, cleaned out.

But DeGross, on an adrenaline high, just wanted to get home and clean up, so he eased himself into his pickup. "I knew I had hurt my back when I got in my truck, but when I reached to get my seatbelt, it was just excruciatingly

sharp pain. I called my wife and told her to meet me at the ER."

Two vertebrae were broken, five disks were damaged and several ligaments in his back were torn.

"My back laid me up in the hospital for six days; I could not get out of bed. It was a long time not knowing how much damage there was going to be and how much pain I was going to be in when I stood up."

He was fitted for a back brace to wear for everything but sleeping. Two weeks after his first hospital visit, blood clots developed, and one broke away and reached his lungs. "They called that a pulmonary embolism, so I spent another six days in the hospital.

"But I feel very blessed to be here and that everything still works. Yes, it was a broken back, but it could have been so much more. I'm not on pain medication, and I don't think there are going to be long-term issues."

DeGross did lose a month of work – he and his wife, Alison, own Diversified Dairy Solutions, specializing in dairy nutrition. But he and his employee, Bryan Soares, are now sampling differently, he says.

"Now we have dairy personnel use a loader and feed box to deliver us feed a safe distance from a pile, and that's where we sample from."

The pile that "got" DeGross "was a huge surprise," he says.

"This particular pile did not look unsafe at all. It was only 11-12' tall at the time that I sampled it and was mechanically shaven. I personally have taken feed samples from piles where I shouldn't have been. I knew they weren't safe, but I took the risk. This pile looked safe from any angle you looked at it from.

"I know it's a cliché, but looks *are* deceiving. And with this particular pile, looks were incredibly deceiving," he says. ♦