

## **AGRICULTURAL HEALTH IN THE COTTON INDUSTRY**

Agriculture is now recognised to be among the highest risk industry groups for occupational injury and disease. Action to improve the safety and well being of farmers, their families and workers is not only a responsible move for primary producers to make, it also makes good business sense.

Farmsafe Australia Inc, the national organisation with a mission to assist the farming community to improve health and safety on farms, has produced a package titled "Managing Farm Safety" as a management tool for primary producers to assist in the management of farm health and safety.

### **Why should we "manage" farm safety?**

1. Injury and deaths on Australian farms are a major problem for the industry, for farm families and farming communities.

Agriculture as an industry is lagging behind most other industries in its occupational health and safety record. Furthermore, as gains in health and safety are being made in other workplaces, so the record of Agriculture is seen as unacceptable by the wider community.

2. In the cotton growing area of north west NSW between 70 to 80 injuries per 100 farms require attention at rural hospitals emergency departments each year, and 13.3 percent of these patients require admission to hospital.

These data do not include patient who attended private doctors rooms for their treatment.

3. Farmers pay for the cost of these injuries by way of:

- Delays in getting farm work done where the farmer or worker is affected
- Payment for medical treatment
- Wages for replacement of workers

- Higher insurance premiums for agricultural industries
  - Payment for rehabilitation eg physiotherapy
4. It therefore makes good sense to address safety as a management issue, and to see safety management as an integral part of our farm management.

This is an important concept, as, to date, farm management training or activity has not focused on the human resource input into production.

1. Safety management *is* an important management issue in other industries
2. It is generally seen as an important part of the management of the human resources in any production, commercial or service industry
3. Furthermore, management of occupational health and safety is a *legislated responsibility for all workplaces in all states in Australia*.
4. Participation in this Farm safety Management Program can assist in reducing risk of illness and injury on farms, AND in meeting legislated responsibilities.

### **What are legislated Occupational Health and Safety responsibilities of farm managers?**

Every primary producer, whether an employer or self-employed, has a legal responsibility (called a duty of care) to ensure that he or she provides a safe working environment. Anyone who enters a farm, whether as a full-time employee, a casual worker or just as a visitor has a right to be protected from any hazards which exist.

Being more specific, primary producers must provide and maintain as far as is practicable a safe and healthy working environment for employees.

This should include:

1. maintaining work areas, machinery and equipment in a safe condition
2. organising safe systems of work

3. ensuring the safe use, handling, storage and transport of equipment and substances, such as fuel and pesticides
4. assessing the health risk to employees in the workplace
5. providing adequate information, instruction, training and supervision to employees to enable them to work safely.

In addition, primary producers should familiarise themselves with their state legislation and specific regulations which may apply with respect to certain items of plant and equipment.

There are significant penalties for breaches of state occupational health and safety legislation. A list of contacts have been provided at the end of the checklist document whom you can contact to provide you with information on your state legal obligations.

The checklist contained in the Managing Farm Safety package is not a Code of Practice and therefore has no legislative or regulatory function.

*However, it is your record that you planned for the management of hazards on your farm. It recognises those controls that you have already implemented and in the future are planning to address.*

It also covers legislative aspects in the National Codes of Practice which include Manual Handling, Noise, Hazardous Substances, Plant and Dangerous Goods.

### **What are the essential elements of managing farm safety?**

There are three essential steps in a management approach to farm health and safety: This has been simplified as the "SAF" principle:

**SEE** it,

**ASSESS** it,

**FIX** it

The most important first step to improving safety on your farm is to identify all the hazards to health and safety on the farm. That is - SEE IT!

The first section, Part 1, of the "Managing Farm Safety" package is a farm safety checklist. It provides assistance to carry out an audit or check of hazards, and is based on a "typical" Australian farm.

It is suggested that the checklist be filled out by walking around the farm with the list. Preferably the check should be undertaken together with workers and/or family members. This has the advantage of sharing of information and observations and can be in itself a training exercise.

Where a hazard has been identified, then an assessment of the risk associated with the problem must be made. ie ASSESS IT!

This assessment will be made:

1. By obtaining information about the risk - material from your state or local Farmsafe Committee and/or your Occupational Health and Safety Department will be available.

Labels will be useful for chemicals, and pesticides and other chemicals should have Material Safety Data Sheets available from your retailer selling the chemicals.

Instruction manuals for equipment and machinery will also be useful.

2. By asking " Can this hazard cause serious injury - loss of life, limb or bodily function?"

If serious harm can occur , the risk should be assessed as high. An example would be the serious injury that can occur from an unguarded PTO shaft.

3. By asking " Is it very likely that this hazard will cause ill effects?"

If the chances of any injury or ill effect are high, then the identified hazard should be considered high risk. An example would be the certain burns to the eye that occur if welding is undertaken without protective eye goggles.

4. By asking "Is this hazard the subject of specific regulations?"

Where specific regulations exist then risk should be regarded as high. An example would be the requirement either as a Code of Practice or regulation, for an approved Roll Over Protective Structure to be fitted on tractors.

*Where risk is high, then urgent attention to fixing the problem should be planned.*

Once hazards of significant risk have been identified, then action should be planned and implemented to control that risk. ie FIX IT!

- Consider possible solutions or control methods for the hazards you have identified, taking into account cost and practicability
- A solution may be as simple as replacing a worn cord on a power tool, or may be more complicated and require long term planning.
- Often appropriate control measures are recommended in safety information accompanying machinery or chemicals

If information is not readily available about appropriate action consider the following order of effectiveness, taking into account cost and practicability:

1. Eliminate the hazard altogether - for example, rendering a piece of faulty equipment inoperable
2. Substitute the hazard
3. Engineering controls, by which is meant modification of equipment or the workplace to provide protection, for example by guards, separation of the worker from the hazard, raising floors or platforms to reduce lifting requirements
4. Design safer working procedures or practice

## 5. Personal protective equipment and clothing, often shortened to PPE

### **The Checklist**

The checklist has been prepared to cover each area of the typical Australian farm.

It is a working document, on which important notes should be made.

It will may be necessary to undertake the audit over several sessions depending on time available. It is important that the date and persons who undertook the check should be recorded

### **The plan of action**

Once the checklist has been undertaken, then a plan of action should be drawn up, and a record of that plan is provided.

Clearly, some control measures, eg changing the design of sheds and work systems, will become part of the longer term development plan for the farming operation. Other solutions may not be immediately available - it may not be possible to find a suitable guard for a piece of equipment. In this case, interim measures should be made, such as clearly marking the hazard with a warning sign, and ensuring that clear instructions are given and recorded (eg in the Register of Training)

### **Other records**

Other records are also required by Occupational Health and Safety legislation in most states. They relate to training and to hazardous substances, including pesticides on farms. Sections 3 and 4 of the Managing Farm Safety package are registers which may be useful for maintaining such records.

*In summary, health and safety on Australian farms is a farm management issue. Farmsafe Australia has taken an important lead in the development of the necessary tools to assist Australian farmers to manage safety. The cotton industry will benefit through the further development of the program to account for its own specific problems.*