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Farm safety failings lead to alarming death spike

Farming has returned to its position of Victoria's most dangerous industry in 2009 recording nine of the 30 work related deaths so far this year.

And with 23 days left of the year WorkSafe wants farm employers, workers and families to take active steps to ensure the death rate is arrested.

The most recent death happened on Tuesday at Warragul in West Gippsland when a 63-year-old man operating a slasher was run over and died.

Just over two weeks ago, at a market garden at Werribee South, a farm worker was run over and died when he was hit by a reversing tractor and trailer.

WorkSafe's Executive Director, John Merritt, said with good rain in many parts of the state, harvesting underway, haymaking and general cleaning-up ahead of the fire season, there is enormous pressure to get work done.

"Unless there is ongoing effort and commitment to safety on every farm and involving every one who lives and works there, the improvements made in the past decade will be undermined along with the industry.

"In the early 2000s it was routine for there to be 10 or more deaths every year on Victorian farms and through a lot of hard work the death rate was cut to zero by 2005.

"The fact that farmers, farm workers and people, often children, 'helping' again accounts for nearly one-third of all Victorian work-related deaths in 2009, should alarm the rural community.

"It is possible to reduce farm deaths, it's been done before, but it requires a community effort."

Mr Merritt said the number of farm deaths was very much out of proportion with the industry's position in the overall population.

"While these are individual incidents, the single factor that connects almost all of this year's fatalities is that the causes could have been identified before disaster struck," Mr Merritt said.

"Greater than the tragedy of the deaths, serious injuries and incidents this year will be that the same type of incident will be repeated if others do not learn from them."

Plan to survive – a typical farm job – what are the issues?

Hay making, now underway in many regions, was a routine task, but there were many potential dangers that had to be addressed.

Breaking down the operation into its component parts reveals issues ranging from people being hit by, or falling from, vehicles; unguarded machinery, use of attachments not suited to the job; securing of loads being moved, poor stacking of bales; falling from height and contractor management.

These are real issues in what might be considered to be a straight-forward task, but they need to be anticipated and given due attention before work begins.

All these issues have taken lives, not necessarily involving in haymaking but on Victorian farms in recent years.

In long grass, hot parts of machinery or sparks can also create a fire risk.

WorkSafe's website – www.worksafe.vic.gov.au - has a range of resources on farm safety and related tasks such as construction, road transport and prevention of manual handling injuries.

You can also call WorkSafe's free and confidential advisory service on 1800 136 089 or inquire about a free safety inspection by an independent consultant.

WorkSafe's 12 farm safety tips for a happy Christmas

1. Maintenance should be regular and carried out by a suitably-qualified person, particularly brakes;
2. Application of parking brakes prevents runovers, even on relatively flat ground;
3. Missing or inadequate guarding, particularly power take offs on tractors can catch clothes, hair or body parts;
4. Working alone increases risks if something goes wrong. Let someone know where you'll be and when you're due back. Take a mobile or two-way, check in;
5. Use equipment best suited for the job;
6. Separate people and moving machinery including trucks making deliveries and pick-ups. Keep them away from power lines – look up and live;
7. Get home-made or modified equipment checked by a suitably-qualified person;
8. Set a good example by demonstrating safety expectations to workers. Ensure they are properly trained and qualified, including contractors. Relying on someone's (or your own) skill and experience can lead to over-confidence and risk-taking;
9. Having fall protection and using it prevents deaths, brain damage and permanent spinal injuries;
10. Wear a helmet when riding a quad bike, motorbike or horse;
11. Working areas of farms and farm machinery are no place for children;
12. Know your limitations.

Victoria Work related deaths 2000-2009 (calendar).

| Year | Total | Reported farm deaths |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 2009 | 30 to date | 9 to date |
| 2008 | 21 total | 3 |
| 2007 | 22 total | 1 |
| 2006 | 29 total | 4 |
| 2005 | 18 total | 0 |
| 2004 | 30 total | 12 |
| 2003 | 27 total | 8 |
| 2002 | 34 total | 10 |
| 2001 | 34 total | 12 |
| 2000 | 31 total | 12 |
| Total | 274 total | 71 |

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