Farming related deaths are an indictment on safety regulators and agriculture

The Australian agriculture sector only employs approximately three per cent (3%) of the nation’s working population yet this sector remains one of the most dangerous workplace environments in the country.

- One in six people killed while on the job in Australia is working on a farm
- Around one third of work-related farm fatalities involve a worker aged 65 years or older
- Only around half of Australian farm workers are covered by workers compensation because most (approximately 46%) are self employed
- An overwhelming concentration of fatalities (consistently around 70%) relate to interaction with plant, machinery and vehicles

For further statistical information and commentary, see "Agricultural Fatality Statistics Summary" below

Agricultural fatality and injury statistics are an indictment on both the lack of effort by agriculture industry participants and safety regulators.

History shows that improved OH&S performance in Australian industries is directly correlated to the activity by safety regulators. Without active regulation, improvement in the agriculture sector’s performance will continue to be poor.

Agriculture has been a sacred cow when it comes to OH&S regulation.

This is no surprise, either economically or politically. The last 20+ years have been some of the toughest years in history for our agricultural enterprises with increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and long-term cost price squeezes across the main areas of agricultural revenue generation.

Kicking an industry when it is down is both “un-Australian” and politically dangerous.

Agriculture is one of the most critical sectors of our economy from an economic perspective in terms of GDP and also from a National Security perspective, allowing us the luxury of not having to rely on imports in a time of crisis.
So, we have an industry which is strategically important however does not have the wherewithal to develop or implement leading practice systems to stop injuring and killing the very people critical to ensuring the supply of produce at alarming rates.

The solution is broader consultative education and financial assistance to develop and implement safe systems of work for agricultural enterprises, followed by more rigorous inspection and prosecution of non-compliance.

It is time that safety regulators put some real horsepower into improving safety standards in agriculture. This needs to be in the form of major investment in education and provision of financial incentives for real safety improvements “behind the farm gate”, and ensuring the inspectorate have a strong mandate and the resources to increase compliance pressure.

The workers compensation schemes in almost all Australian jurisdictions are hopelessly inadequate tools for providing any financial incentive to improve employer safety. Quite simply, workers comp schemes are bureaucratic and inefficient claims processing facilities that are incapable of incentivising the reduction of risk.

Given the miserable assistance that organisations like Farmsafe Australia, State Farming Associations and the NFF have been able to access, we applaud what these organisations have been able to achieve in the area of farm safety improvement.

Whilst we accept that, in recent years, both the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (now Agrifutures Australia) and Safe Work Australia have both called for an increased focus on these statistics, at Plant Assessor we believe a more consistent application of simple, existing solutions could significantly reduce the number of farming related fatalities.

Frankly, this effort is too little given these atrocious statistics. It is time to use the weight of the agriculture lobby to campaign for more proactive support from politicians and safety regulators across the Country, if for no other reason than to increase the chances of farm owners and workers finishing each and every work day either as well as they started it.

Further information on farm injuries and fatalities is set out below.

Agricultural Fatality Statistics Summary

Every year since 2003 there has been an average of 17 deaths per 100,000 workers in the farm sector which is approximately nine times higher than the national fatality rate. Farm worker deaths account for between one in four of all worker fatalities in Australia every year!

It’s both disappointing and highly concerning that farm death rates in Australia continue to occur at alarming levels.
Since 2003 there have been numerous studies regarding farm related deaths. The most recent compressive study was released by Safe Work Australia in 2015 and covers the period from 2005 to 2014. During this period an average of 41 workers killed each year in agriculture industry.

Since this report was tabled, the number of total farm related deaths remains at around 65 each year with those occurring during the course of farming related work is still 40+ (44 deaths in both 2015 and 2016)

On top of those who die while working in the agribusiness sector, an average of 1500 workers acquire injuries that require hospital treatment each year. The total economic cost of these fatalities and injuries is over $2.1 billion annually.

According to a recently released report from National Farm Injury Data Centre, a joint venture between Australian Centre for Agricultural Health & Safety and The University of Sydney, 68 people died as the result of farm accident in 2017.

Nine of the 68 deaths involved a child aged under 15 years and tractor (13) and quad bike (11) accidents were the most common cause of death. There were a further 179 serious, non-fatal, on-farm injury events reported in the 12 months to December 31, 2017 and quad bike related injury accounted for over 22% of all incidents.


