

HEALTH & SAFETY AMONGST OUR FARMING COMMUNITY

By James M Coffey

Whilst our farming community was the largest contributor to our Irish economy now sadly it is the largest contributing sector to fatal accidents at work when compared to the number of people it employs. Employing approximately 7% of our work force it yields 36% of accidental deaths in the work place. Ever since our joining the European Community in 1973 Irish agriculture has been subject to ever changing farming laws, policies and guidelines which must be observed and adhered to in order to gain access to valued markets. This has placed greater pressures on our farming community with regard to paperwork deadlines, traceability and quality assurance. Leaving less time available for the normal daily tasks and risk prevention on the farm. Generating a tendency to rush certain tasks and taking short cuts. This has been reinforced by the cheap food policies of the European community, putting greater pressures on our farmers, basically to produce good food for less. With the result, that the typical farming unit has been unable to sustain a high level of labour input per unit of output again contributing to less time for each daily task. Figures published by the health and safety authority for 2006 show that 50 work related deaths were reported compared to 74 fatalities in 2005, a reduction of 32%. However,

agriculture remains the most dangerous, resulting in 18 deaths, of which two were child deaths and ten of the 18 agricultural deaths involved people over 65 years of age. Eight of the fatal accidents in the agricultural sector occurred in Cork.

The most prominent fatal accident triggers were 'fall, collapse or breakage of 'material' accounting for 9 deaths and 'falls from heights' accounting for a further 9 deaths. Five fatalities each were due to loss of control of machinery and other associated equipment. Four fatalities involved animals, primarily due to accident with bulls. Over 7000 non-fatal work injuries were reported to the Authority in 2006. The most common non-fatal accident triggers reported to the Authority in 2006 for all sectors were handling, lifting and carrying (32%), and slips, trips and falls (16%). These have been the two most



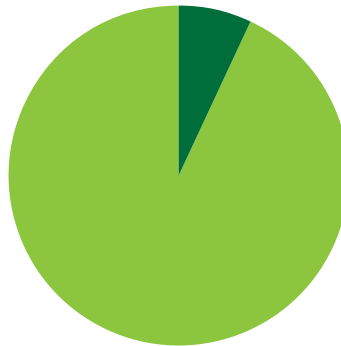
common accident triggers every year since 2000. But, it is my opinion that complacency with the animals, machinery and powered equipment maybe the biggest enemy. However the facts remain the same in that in the numbers being killed on our farms is a cause of serious concern as farmers are still prepared to take life threatening risks on their holdings. Many of the victims being the main wage earner on their respective holdings having devastating and emotional consequences on the farm family leading to the possible dispersal of livestock, leasing or sale of the farm.

The department of agriculture and food are aware of these statistics and have acted upon it by distributing a new code of practice to all farmers earlier this year, in an effort to create a national culture of health and safety in the workplace.

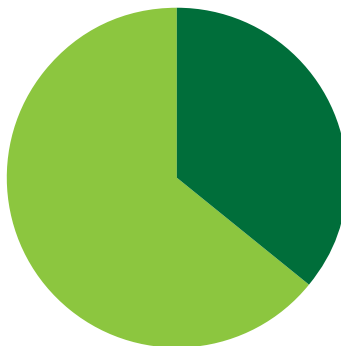
As individuals visiting farms or servicing them we should be well aware of the potential dangers on a farm before entering and the farmers under the new code of practice guidelines has a responsibility to post adequate signage at entrance points onto the holding eg. "Beware of Bull", "Danger-Overhead powerlines" or "Caution -Dangerous Chemicals"

Exposure to agricultural chemicals pose a risk by various routes including ingestion, inhalation and absorption. Where the severity of the threat depends on the toxicity of the chemical. The ill effects of these chemicals can vary from skin irritation, allergy poisoning or even death. Some insecticides and herbicides have been positively linked to causing irreversible chemically induced Parkinson's Disease which effects movement and is characterised by stiffness, shakiness

7% employed
in Agriculture



36%
workplace fatalities



and a shuffling walk. Therefore it is of paramount importance that we see that these chemicals are carefully locked away in a signed store room, preferably with a sloping floor to the centre so as to act as a container in the event of a spillage. Handling of chemicals, particularly the concentrated form should only carried out while wearing protective clothing and face masks.

TRACTORS and the associated powered machinery are a significant source of fatalities on farms. The primary causes of accidents involving machinery are entanglement in high speed moving parts, being struck and being crushed, leaving one seriously disabled or dead. It is therefore crucial that when approaching engaged machinery that a safe distance is maintained between the visitor and the machine until the operator is aware of your presence and the machine is disengaged. Those at risk of injury are both persons operating and those in the vicinity when the machine is being operated. As far as is possible protective guarding should be in place to cover rotating shafts, belts, chains and sprockets.

LIVESTOCK - when it comes to livestock the message is very clear, visitors to farms should 'stay clear' and the farmers themselves should only approach animals with the appropriate handling facilities which should be checked to be functioning correctly before handling begins. The usage of appropriate danger signage is crucial here especially where there is an active bull and it at this point it is important not to forget the deadly protective maternal instinct of the recently calved cow - for this short period directly after calving the female can be equally as dangerous as any bull. Fatalities involving the elderly, caused by bulls is by far the greatest cause of death on farms involving animals. So it is very important that all necessary precautions

are taken to avoid any risks where dangerous animals are involved.

ELECTRICITY causes a significant number of deaths on farms, where electrical equipment is not to the correct standard or is not well maintained, there is a risk of electrocution. Those at risk not only include the farmer but also anyone entering the farm who maybe in contact with faulty electrical equipment or overhead cables. The use of appropriate outdoor switches, bonding and proper sockets and due attention given to all overhead power lines are extremely important.

FARM BUILDINGS - particularly falling through roofs due to the collapse or breakage of fragile material has caused many deaths and cases of paralysis. Drowning in slurry and water and gas poisoning has been responsible for 10% of all farm deaths over the last ten years.

Prevention of all these deaths is possible with adequate preventative measures and adherence to guidelines as set down by the department of agriculture, the health and safety authority.

