

Valuing Your Community, Business, Families and Working Lives

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Introduction

There are those in the dairy industry who have had to inform family and friends that an employee or employer has been killed or seriously injured while engaged in work. These individuals who have borne the duty of informing are often the strongest advocates for best practice in health and safety management as a direct result of their experience.

Deaths and serious injuries in dairy farming are far too common. These incidents have an enormous impact on the families, friends and communities at the centre of such tragedies. Many of those successful dairy farmers seriously injured are lost to the industry forever.

When dairy farming businesses focus on what *they can do* to protect those working within the dairy farming community they add value to their business. Some of the benefits of best practice in health and safety management result in:

- Reduction in lost time injuries
- Stronger labour markets, in thriving dairy communities
- Safer family environments
- Improvements in quality systems and production
- Reductions in business risk
- Better quality working lives
- Improvements in employment relationships
- Improved livestock management.

Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 in summary

Under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 (HSE Act 1992) there is a duty on employers to have an effective method for:

- systematically identifying existing hazards to employees

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- systematically identifying new hazards
- regularly assessing each hazard identified, and determining whether or not it is a significant hazard.

Those hazards that are significant need to be controlled (Hierarchy of Controls):

- eliminate if practicable, by getting rid of it. Substituting it for something else
- if elimination is impracticable, then isolate by guarding it. Putting a physical or time barrier between the person and the hazard
- if elimination and isolation are impracticable, then minimize, the last line of defence. Training, operating procedures, personal protective clothing and equipment (chaps, eye protection, respirators and the like), signs, etc

There is a duty to provide information to employees about the likes of:

- what to do if an emergency arises.
- all identified hazards to which an employee is or may be exposed and the steps to control those hazards.
- All hazards the employee will or may create and the steps to control them..

There is a duty to ensure employees are adequately trained and if they are not then they should be supervised. Have regard to the employee's knowledge and experience when assessing whether they are adequately trained.

There are also duties on others such as employees, self-employed, principals, persons selling or supplying plant, persons who control the place of work, contractors.

This is only a superficial summary and The Occupational Safety and Health Service (OSH) can provide you with more accurate and detailed information if required. The purpose of this presentation is not to summarise the HSE Act 1992, but to present how best practice in health and safety management can benefit your community, business, families and working lives.

Hazard management

When you begin implementing a health and safety management system it may seem like a very mechanical or even bureaucratic process. This should not trouble you because all of us tend to take that initial approach when learning a new skill. Eventually the process becomes second nature and you hide the steps behind your achievements and successes. There is immense value in involving the employee in this process. In doing so you share workload and the businesses successes and achievements.

Linking OSH to your working communities

The Occupational Safety and Health Service is one of the services of the Department of Labour (DoL). DoL's overarching outcome is "people with high quality working lives in thriving and inclusive communities". From this OSH's mission is "facilitating the achievement of best practice workplace health and safety in New Zealand".

Before dairy farmers invest their valuable time and financial resources in health and safety management it is important to assess what the investment is going to achieve. One of the most powerful health and safety tools that a business can have is current knowledge of best practice in health and safety management in agriculture. OSH and other service providers like Federated Farmers and Industry Training Organisations have resources that can inform you about best practice.

Why document your health and safety?

From my summary of the HSE act you can see that the most important component of an effective health and safety management system is communication. We all know that, for communication to be effective, documentation is important for the following reasons:

Document to remember

There are some exceptional people out there who can gather information without recording it. Unfortunately most of us get lost when we fill our heads with information. What we don't write down we are likely to forget or misremember. This is also true for information that we are trying to convey to others.

Document to understand

When we record information the writing induces us to think about what we are trying to achieve. This process helps you and your employees see more clearly how to implement health and safety management.

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Document to gain perspective

OSH often hears that health and safety is just common sense, I do not dispute this. However, we often think our ideas are more coherent while in the warmth of our minds than they turn out to be in cold print. Also, documenting information helps you put health and safety in perspective in your business.

Document to keep an audit record

Verbal agreements have little value. Think about other aspects of your business, would you purchase a run off block with only a handshake as agreement in closing the sale?

The impact of poor health and safety management

Systems management is not new to the dairy farming industry. As you know, effective systems management runs through most, if not all, aspects of dairy farming. As the dairy farming industry and individual businesses grow, effective systems management will become even more important to take control of your business. I am sure you will agree that when incidents and accidents occur in your industry they have a negative impact on production. For instance, you or a valued employee are injured in the middle of calving. Now that you have lost a labour unit in the middle of the busiest time of year what is the impact going to be on your production? Can you source another experienced employee at the busiest time of year? Are you going to lose calves that could be saved when the weather packs up? What will this accident cost? When am I going to have time to see my kids before they go to bed? How much time will the OSH and ACC paperwork take? Now I have lost my most experienced employee, how are the other employees going to cope? How am I going to feel about an employee being injured while working for me?

These are the real issues that lost-time injuries create. As an OSH inspector, best practice in health and safety management can sometimes be a hard sell to busy people. It can be especially difficult to convince some people to invest time in improving health and safety management when the benefits of best practice do not readily appear on the balance sheets. However, when the wheels fall off your health and safety management its negative impact can be quite apparent on the balance sheet. If you consider your cows are your most valuable assets then those people handling your livestock are intrinsically linked to the production improvements that you strive to get out of your herd. For those that have experienced the negative impact of workplace incidents and injury, they are often the best advocates for taking control of this aspect of their business.

For instance, taking the previous scenario of the injury during calving. Probability would dictate that you would have difficulty replacing an experienced labour unit at this time of year. Hence, there is going to be extra pressure on other employees at an already demanding and

stressful time of year. Can you guarantee that people are not going to take short cuts, make mistakes in their work so they can complete their work, leading to having your milk graded? I'm sure that having your milk graded will show up on the balance sheet. Just remember best practice in production and health and safety are intrinsically linked.

Management systems rarely operate in complete isolation from one another. It would be rare for a business to have exceptional quality management and extremely poor health and safety management and vice versa. Hence, improvements in health and safety management will also add value to your quality management systems.

Health and safety management and employment relations

Health and safety management and employment relations/human resource management are intrinsically linked. For instance, the demands of work can lead to dysfunctional stress during busy times of year. Fatigue and stress can lead to mistakes and accidents. Mistakes and accidents lead to lost production and often lead to unhappy workplaces. Unhappy workplaces lead to poor retention and other employment relationship problems.

If you employ staff and your business has grown over recent years it may be time to concentrate on taking advantage of your position. It can be challenging but it could be time to concentrate on managing employees to manage the cow/grass issues. Having effective health and safety systems and employment agreements is an important part of managing your team. This may afford you the advantages of achieving that work life balance and the experience of mentoring employees, seeing some of them develop and move forward in the industry. As employees develop and progress they add value to your business. An important part of that is to have your expectations of employees clearly documented in employment agreements, health and safety systems and quality systems.

Another Department of Labour service is the Employment Relations Service (ERS). This service employs Labour Inspectors, Mediation Services and the Information Offices on the Infoline. You can get free and confidential information from the ERS Infoline on 0800 800 863. They can provide you with information about employment agreements and employment conditions. Your industry has many other service providers who can assist you with employment relation systems, i.e. Dexcel, Federated Farmers, Ag ITO, to name a few.

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Part of achieving best practice is setting the standard yourself

I talk to dairy farmers a lot about their health and safety systems. They often discuss with me the problems that they have with ensuring that their employees wear ATV helmets since the release of the guidelines, or chainsaw chaps. Sometimes further conversation reveals that they themselves (as the employer) do not wear personal protective equipment.

Whether you are aware of it or not, many young dairy workers look up to their employers for guidance or leadership. This is further demonstrated through the many mentoring relationships within your industry. Due to these relationships the best way to achieve best practice is to lead by example.

Many farmers ask about their responsibility to employees who refuse to utilise protective clothing and equipment. Responsibility may be summarized as, *the standard that you set is the standard that you walk past.*

Reducing your business risk

Do you wish to achieve freedom from the costs associated with workers compensation claims, employee replacement, litigation and prosecution and gain the satisfaction associated with meeting your moral obligation to protect valued employees? Then the first step would be to prioritise where your risk lies greatest.

If litigation and prosecution are your greatest fear then the safeguarding of machinery should be your first priority. The operation and principles for safeguarding of machinery are well documented. Unguarded machinery is a huge business risk if an employee is injured. OSH prosecutions for unguarded prime movers, transmission machinery and moving parts make up the majority of cases that go through the court. The guarding of machinery is often the easiest risk to reduce, as standards of guarding are well documented.

Healthy and safe family environments

Up until now, I have focused on how best practice in health and safety management can add value to your business. One of the benefits that dairying affords is a rural lifestyle that is second to none. Farming is unique among New Zealand businesses in that farms are a place where families live and work. In most other industries people exit the workplace at the end of the working day and in doing so leave behind their associated hazards.

There is a dark side to poor health and safety management. That is the tragedy that occurs every time a person living/working in dairying is injured or killed. One of the frightening aspects is that it is not always those working in dairying that have farm accidents. Too often it is your children.

Health and safety best practice will not only add value to your business but also provide healthy and safe family environments. For instance, the development of a basic emergency plan with the introduction of a trained first aider will obviously benefit your children's welfare in the event of an emergency as much as those working on the farm.

At times working in dairying is not without its physical challenges. For those who have sustained permanent and severe loss due to injury these challenges can be too great. Every year New Zealand dairy farming loses talent from the industry, due to fatalities and permanent injury.

Put yourself in the frame of a person with injuries (blindness) above. The result of an eye injury due to chemical splash. Every day dairy farmers work with caustic soda (NaOH). For the sake of ensuring that eye protection and facilities for flushing eyes with water are provided, this type of permanent injury could have been prevented. The loss of your eyesight would most probably result in your exit from the industry.

Consider a person who has had their fingers amputated by unguarded machinery. For the sake of a guard over transmission machinery this type of accident would have been readily prevented.

The social impacts of these injuries are huge. Imagine not being around to see your loved ones or hold your new child or grandchild.

Summary

OSH cannot make your farm a healthier or safer place. Only you have the power to do that. You have heard the reasons for achieving best practice in health and safety management and how it can add value on many levels. Could you think of a reason why this aspect of business should not be a priority on your farm?

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