

Longer days, more work, greater danger

Spring is coming, and with it peak workload. Reduce your risk of injury or even death with some simple precautions.



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Last year saw a welcome reduction in farm workplace deaths. This may be due to more help being available on farms due to the COVID-19 lockdown. As people return to work, these extra hands won't be around, so be extra careful to prevent potential accidents.

Safety around tractors and machinery.

Taking time to get machinery ready for spring work is vital. Proper maintenance of tractors and machinery is good for the equipment and enhances your safety.

Days are getting longer, but ensure the full set of functioning lights and flashing amber beacons are present and working. Check that all guards and protective covers are in place. PTO covers and chains, including O guards and U guards, should be checked for signs of wear or damage.

Check hydraulic oil hoses, rams and couplings to ensure there are no signs of deterioration. Repair or replace where required. When carrying out these checks, beware of the risk of high pressure oil escaping and injuring your skin or eyes.

Wheel rims and tires must be in good condition. Check for cracks or bulges in the tyres and cracks or loose nuts in the rims. Tyre inflation must be appropriate to the load and the task.

Visibility from the tractor is very important, so take time to regularly clean windows and mirrors.

Safety when handling slurry

Drowning is an all-too-frequent occurrence with slurry. Working around an agitator or slurry tanker is demanding. It is easy to lose concentration and unintentionally 'step-back' into a slurry tank. Make sure there are



safety grids and barriers installed to eliminate this possibility.

Be extra vigilant when placing slurry agitators into position. Use access holes for slurry pipes. Keep slurry tanks and pits securely covered or fenced.

Slurry gassing

Slurry produces a range of gases based on the nature of the fermentation occurring. Poisoning can happen 'above ground' due to the release of Hydrogen Sulphide (H₂S). H₂S can be detected by smelling at 0.1ppm. At 150ppm, the olfactory nerve which detects smell in the nose is desensitised, meaning H₂S cannot be detected by smell.

The gas produces adverse health effects at increasing concentration and death can take place rapidly above 700ppm. Teagasc research has shown that fatal concentrations of gas can occur once agitation commences.

Key safety tips when agitating slurry

- Always wait for a breezy day.
- Open all doors and vents.

- Remove all animals from the shed.
- Ensure people, particularly children or older persons, do not enter during or after agitation.

- Have at least two people present at all times.

- Check that machinery is in good repair and all guards are in place.
- Make sure tank access points are guarded.

- Stay away from the agitation point for at least the first 30 minutes after agitation starts.

- Remember, poisoning can occur either outdoors or indoors in calm conditions.

BEWARE: Slurry gas can travel into linked tanks or buildings that are connected by drainage pipes or channels. This means you or others in the yard may be unaware that milking parlours, store sheds or even workshops could have high concentrations of potentially fatal gas present.

Safety at calving time

Health and safety data shows that over the last 10 years, 196 people have lost their lives in farming related

work activity in Ireland. Of these fatalities, 38 involved livestock. In 2021 alone, working with cattle accounted for three fatalities.

Attacks by recently-calved cows are a common cause of accidents. Never turn your back on a cow when handling her newborn calf. Where possible, keep a barrier between you and the cow when removing the calf.

Tiredness

Sleep and good food is very important around calving time. Identifying risks requires your full concentration. Plan to have help available to allow you some time to rest.

Cow/heifer temperament

A cow that is normally quiet can become aggressive at calving. It is important to minimise the amount of interaction with the cow at this time. Good equipment and well-designed facilities can help achieve this.

Health and welfare around calving

When good management practices are

in place to manage cow body condition, nutrition and health, the likelihood of difficult calvings requiring intervention is reduced.

Reducing the need to assist a cow is good for the cow and saves time, energy and avoids the risks associated with this task.

Fit and healthy cows are also more likely to produce healthy vigorous calves, which helps to reduce the workload associated with caring for weak calves.

•**Dust:** Prevent or greatly reduce exposure to dust and spores when liming or bedding calving pens. Keep a set of dust masks in a clean, dry, convenient location when doing these jobs.

•**Hygiene:** Wearing arm length gloves and washable protective clothing and boots when assisting cows at calving will reduce the likelihood of the cow picking up infection. It will also reduce the risk of transfer of zoonotic diseases to the farmer.

•**Calving camera:** Monitoring cows remotely with a camera can help

reduce trips to the shed.

•**Calving pen and gate:** Securely restraining a cow at calving helps to reduce the physical demands associated with an assisted calving and reduces the risk of injury. Pen design should include a physical barrier (gate) between you and the cow at all times as she is encouraged into the head gate. Opening sections in the calving gate will also help if the calf needs assistance to suck.

•**Tagging calves:** Never tag a calf in a pen with its mother present. Always have a strong barrier or gate between you and the cow when tagging or separating a calf from its mother.

•**Good lighting:** It is essential to have good lighting around the yard and in sheds used for calving. Lighting will help to make the job efficient and will reduce the risk of trips and falls.

•**Calving equipment:** Always keep the calving jack and calving ropes clean, in good repair and stored safely.

• Keep children away from the shed at calving time.

Causes of farm workplace deaths in 2021

In 2021, nine farm workplace deaths occurred in agriculture (crop and animal production), two in the forestry and logging and one was related to farm construction (provisional data).

Thus, 12 workplace fatalities occurred on farms. Of the nine agriculture deaths, four each were in the '35-54' and '65 and older' age categories, with one 'aged 17 years or under'.

Four of the farm deaths were associated with farm vehicles, three with livestock, one fall from height and one due to a wound.

The 'forestry and logging' fatal injuries were associated with cutting timber on farms.

The construction death related to a wall collapse during construction.

Our sympathies are with the bereaved. To prevent further tragedies we all need to make farm safety our top priority in the year ahead.

Hurry and rushing are major factors associated with farm injuries. Pay particular attention to avoiding tractor knockdown or crush injuries or getting attacked by a cow with newborn calf during the coming months.

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