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On the tracks: Level-headed thinking vital

Farmland railway crossings pose big risks to workers – sometimes even when properly used. Johann Tasker reports

Two accidents within the past 18 months have served as stark reminders of the dangers associated with user-worked crossings. Although no one was killed in either incident, both tractor drivers were lucky to escape with their lives (see “Tractor driver hit by train had permission to cross line” and “Network Rail failed to minimise risk at level crossing”, opposite).

OTHERS aren’t always so fortunate. Although user-worked crossings account for one in three level crossings and are often infrequently used, they account for more than half of all recorded near-misses between trains and vehicles – and two fatalities on average every year.

SIGNIFICANT RISK

The need to minimise risks when using farming user-worked crossings topped the agenda at a meeting of railway and farm safety representatives last month at Cannock Chase, Staffordshire. The event was organised by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH).

“The problem we’ve had is getting the message across about the significant risk [these crossings pose] to farmers, farmworkers and rail users,” says Alan Plom, vice-chairman of the IOSH rural industries group and a Farm Safety Partnership board member.

“The perception is often that a farmer can nip across quickly – there is a belief that a train is far enough away, but often it is coming at full speed, he adds. “It is a sudden shock when they realise the risk they are facing.”

Part of the problem is that the crossings were designed in the Victorian era, says Mr Plom. Today, trains are faster and farm machinery bigger. “When you’re sitting in a farm vehicle, your bonnet is so very bigger. “When you’re sitting in a tractor cab, you have no idea of how big the train is. Then you get a sudden shock when you realise the risk.”

Alan Meredith, senior engineer and HM inspector of railways at Network Rail, says user-worked crossings are “safe if you follow the instructions at the crossing.”

But the risk that they pose often goes below the radar, he adds. “While you can say there are instructions to follow – and that is what you must do for the safety of yourself and the train – clearly there is an element of residual risk in crossing the railway at one of these crossings,” explains Mr Meredith.

For this reason, user-worked crossings should be permanently closed in situations where a farmer can do without them or can take a diversionary route – even if doing so adds a couple of miles to the journey, says Mr Meredith.

In cases where having a crossing is deemed necessary, farmers should ensure that employers undertake pre-planning and carry out a full risk assessment before starting any work which requires access to a user-worked crossing.

Mr Meredith says: “If I was the tractor driver at the side of the railway line, the train came to a stop 410m beyond the crossing. The cab was severely deformed by the impact, and the driver’s door broke away. The tractor driver was taken to hospital. The train driver and some of the 135 passengers sustained minor injuries. The Rail investigation is now seeking to identify the sequence of events that led to the accident. It is also considering the method of authorising vehicles to use the crossing and any other facilities which may have influenced the actions of the people involved.

Two accidents at farm crossings in recent months have brought safety issues into sharp focus

Stop, look both ways and listen – never leave them open

You should ensure that employees understand pre-planning and carry out a full risk assessment before starting any work which requires access to a user-worked crossing.

Mr Meredith says: “If I was the driver, I would ask Network Rail, which owns and manages the railway network, for a joint risk assessment of any user-worked level crossing on their land. Such an inspection can result in the implementation of additional safety measures.

Network Rail says its aim is to ensure level crossing safety. More than 930 level crossings have been closed since 2010, sometimes replaced with bridges or underpasses. It has also teamed up with the NFU in a safety campaign aimed at farmers.

It aims to remind land owners to use trackside telephones to call the signaler before crossing the line. Network Rail also provides farms with instructional booklets designed to be understood by farmworkers, whatever their nationality or first language.

“Level crossings can be confusing to those unused to them, but by following a few simple rules users can learn how to cross them with safety and confidence,” says Network Rail level crossing manager Robert Havenrood.