



South Cumbria &
North Lancashire Branch

Joint Zoom meeting 21st January 2021



South Cumbria Occupational
Health & Safety Group

Topic: *Farm health and safety*

Speakers: Danny Pyrah, Senior Risk Management Consultant, *NFU Mutual RMS*

Gary McAteer, Chair, *South Cumbria & North Lancashire IOSH Branch*, welcomed members to the joint virtual meeting with *South Cumbria Occupational Health & Safety Group (SCOHSG)*. He then introduced our speaker, Danny Pyrah, Senior Risk Management Consultant, *NFU Mutual RMS*

Danny introduced himself by giving members a brief résumé of his experience – 20 years working in health and Safety/fire safety in the construction industry, for *Local Authorities* and the *Prison Service* followed by ten years focusing on agricultural safety.

He started his presentation by posing the questions “...*What’s the problem with agriculture? ...*” and “...*Why has agriculture got the worst rates of workplace fatalities in the UK? ...*”

He used *HSE’s 2019/20* statistics to illustrate the types of agricultural accidents and incidents that still occur. Then he discussed the reasons why it was more difficult to establish routine safe systems of work in many parts of the agricultural industry particularly on small family run farms.

In 2019/20 there were 21 fatalities in agriculture, forestry, and fishing. Of these:

- 7 workers were killed by moving vehicles.
- 4 workers were killed by falls from height.
- 4 workers were killed when struck by an object.
- 2 workers were killed by an animal.
- 2 workers were killed by machinery malfunction/misuse.
- 2 workers were killed when trapped by a structure (temporary or semi-permanent) collapsing.

Danny went on to explain that in addition to these fatalities many other agricultural accidents led to a wide range of injuries some of which were life changing. The common causes of non-fatal injuries are similar to the causes of fatal injuries:

- Machinery malfunction/misuse.
- Being struck by a moving vehicle.
- Being injured by an animal (usually a cow or a bull).
- Falling from height.
- Slips, trips and falls.
- Manual handling.

Danny explained that there was often an attitude amongst agricultural workers that “...*it will never happen to me...*”, but it can, and sadly, the accidents that do happen are usually avoidable. Within the agricultural industry if a serious accident happens on a nearby farm or forest it acts as a ‘wake up’ call, but usually this effect only lasts for a few years.

Danny then identified the main reasons why managing risks on farms is so much harder than in other workplaces. These include:

- Farmers live ‘on the job’; it’s their family home.
- Working long hours, often alone.
- Working in all weathers.
- Financial constraints.
- The average age of farmers is about 60 years.

He explained that managing risks such as lone working can be tricky in mobile blackspot areas, or if mobile phones run out of charge during the day, or if a farm worker lives alone and there is no system in place to ensure that the worker gets home safely after completing their lone working task. Danny said that it can also be difficult to get emergency vehicles to remote areas or for emergency responders to pinpoint the exact location of the accident. He recommended that loan workers download the **what3words** app that has devised an easy way to identify precise locations anywhere in the world. Every 3m square has been given a unique combination of three words - a **what3words** address – that can pinpoint a person's precise location if they have an active mobile telephone and a reliable mobile signal.

Danny said that the saddest thing about farm accidents was that they sometimes involved children because the farm is their home. He then summarised the main ways of preventing avoidable agricultural accidents:

1. Having a routine maintenance programme for all vehicles and machinery.
 - Can be difficult on a farm with financial constraints.
 - Easily overlooked during busy times, such as lambing time.
2. Basic routine pre-use checks for all vehicles and machinery.
 - Easily forgotten when in a hurry.
3. Ensuring that 'Safe Stop' procedures are 'second nature'.
 - Namely: handbrake, neutral, engine off, key out.
 - Easily forgotten when in a hurry, or during an emergency in inclement weather.
4. Pre-planning of non-routine tasks.
5. Appropriate training
 - sometimes seen as impossible due to financial and/or time constraints

Danny emphasised that most agricultural accidents involving vehicles could be avoided by following the mantra: safe driver, safe vehicle, safe route but, sadly, in the real world when people are under pressure, basic checks often get overlooked. Danny said that *NFU* had teamed up with *Tilly your Trailer* to promote its trailer safety campaign. *Tilly your Trailer* is an 18 point inspection procedure aimed at ensuring that trailers are properly maintained and serviced (see [Tilly Pass. Head to Tow.](#))

Danny reminded members that a significant contributory cause of agricultural accidents was fatigue. He then highlighted five tips for coping with fatigue:

- Sleep well and allow yourself adequate rest time – often easier said than done!
- Exercise regularly – this does not have to be formal exercise.
- Eat healthily and drink water regularly.
- Keep in touch with others – let fellow workers and/or family members know where you plan to be working and for how long.
- Ask for help if you are feeling tired.

Danny then considered working at height, a common activity across the agricultural industry. He explained that many agricultural buildings had old and/or fragile roofs where it was difficult to see the weaknesses and damage to identify what repairs were needed without closer inspection. Often roof repairs are needed urgently for instance, after heavy rain ingresses through weak spots. When there is an urgent need for repairs to be completed there is a temptation not to follow safe procedures such as:

- Never walking on the purlins or the bolts to gain access to the problem area of the roof.
- Ensuring that roof ladders span at least three purlins and are well secured.
- Ensuring there are enough boards rather than using a leapfrog technique with an inadequate number of boards.

Another common agricultural task that involves working at height is stacking bales. Danny explained that it was important to ensure that the stack was interlocked on firm level ground and that ideally mechanical equipment was used to stack the bales and to retrieve them when they were needed.

Next Danny discussed mechanical aids that are used to assist people working at height. He said that some agricultural workers still used risky methods to undertake work at height such as lifting people using tipper buckets, baskets and fork-lift trucks. He said that man baskets are a safer option but that they are expensive to buy and to maintain. They can also cause safety problems, especially if they are home made. He said that when using man baskets it was important to ensure that:

- The loader and basket are compatible.
- The equipment is LOLER tested every six months.
- Tilt mechanisms are locked off.
- There are no nearby overhead hazards such as overhead power lines, asbestos.
- The person undertaking the work at height is secured by a harness and has the necessary skills to do the job especially if it involves using of chainsaws or, undertaking electrical work etc...
- That workers involved have received appropriate work at height training.

Danny reminded members that, as with all agricultural tasks, it was important to get into the habit of doing an 'on-the-job' work at height risk assessment and to plan the work before starting the task.

Danny then considered the risks faced by agricultural workers who look after livestock. They need to work in all weathers, their working hours vary with the seasons and can sometimes be very long, for instance during the lambing season. In addition, some animals, such as cattle, may be unpredictable, especially if they think that their young are in danger. Farmers are usually skilled animal handlers, but it is important that they ensure that fellow workers have appropriate experience and training and that they have proper animal handling facilities such as a cattle crush and that they are always on the alert for unpredictable animal behaviour.

Stock farmers often have the added problem of *Rights of Way* crossing their land. This gives them added responsibilities because they have a 'duty of care' to walkers. Ways of coping with this include:

- Where possible keeping cattle in fields that are not crossed by *Rights of Way*.
- Ensuring that paths are clearly marked.
- Undertaking regular checks of fences, stiles and gates on Rights of Way.
- Consider installing signage such as *Beware of the Bull, Cows with calves, Keep dogs on leads* etc...

Danny explained that the rapid development of new technologies meant that there are likely to be many additional risks that will need to be assessed in future associated with developments such as: the installation of banks of solar panels, and the use of Anaerobic Digester plants, biomass boilers and robots.

Danny then discussed zoonotic diseases that agricultural workers may encounter while working such as:

- *Weil's disease* – carried by rodents; 'flu like symptoms but can result in organ failure if not treated soon enough with antibiotics.
- *Orf* – from sheep and goats; manifests as red lumps, can be very painful.
- *Enzootic abortion* – caught from sheep; pregnant women workers must avoid contact with ewes during lambing.

He said that the best way to avoid these diseases was to have high standards of hygiene, to wear PPE when necessary, to ensure that stock is healthy, to have a controlled vaccination programme, to keep cuts and grazes clean and covered and to have a rodent control programme.

He then mentioned some of the other things that caused ill health amongst agricultural workers that there was not time to discuss such as: noise and vibration, pesticides, dusts, gases, fumes, dangerous atmospheres in slurry tanks and asbestos.

Danny fielded questions from members about practical ways of improving the safety culture on small farms and throughout the agricultural industry. Topics raised as questions and in the Zoom chat included collaborating with *Young Farmers'* groups, the importance of relevant health and safety modules in agricultural college courses, a more proactive approach by *HSE* inspectors and a more collaborative approach across industries about practical solutions to common problems such as working at height.

Gary thanked Danny for giving members such a wide ranging, worthwhile and informative presentation. He also suggested that he hoped that Danny would agree to speak to our members again about some of the topics that he did not have time to cover at this meeting.

Related UK Government and HSE web site links:

Agricultural safety guidance: [Agriculture health and safety, farming industry help and advice \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/health-and-safety-farming-industry-help-and-advice/)

Farm vehicles: [Farm vehicles - Agricultural machinery - HSE](https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/farm-vehicles/)

Safe use of agricultural machinery: [Agriculture: Machinery - safe use \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/machinery-safe-use/)

Maintenance of agricultural vehicles and machinery: [Maintenance - Agriculture - HSE](https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/machinery-maintenance/)

Working at height in agriculture: [Agriculture: Preventing falls \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/preventing-falls/)

Working with livestock: [Agriculture: livestock \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/livestock/)

Agricultural health topics: [Agricultural Health Topics \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/health-topics/)