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Risk Awareness, Risk Assessment & Risk Culture

Farm Safety Week is an opportunity to reinforce key safety messages and yet it is often the simplest message that rarely gets a mention. So, pay attention.

Be aware and assess the risk. That's the message.

Awareness of risk is a critical factor, if not the most important factor in safety messaging with regard to any danger on farm.

But what is risk awareness? It is simply the acknowledgement that a risk, or a combination of risks, are involved in an activity that is to be performed.

Why is such a simple thing so important? Because if you know the risk, you have a choice of how you will perform the activity and that allows you the opportunity to reduce or eliminate the risk altogether.

If you were aware that a chemical was able to cause caustic burns, you would make a different choice to how you dressed when handling that chemical, to say, how you would dress if you were watering the garden, right?

Safety can be that simple.

“Farmers and farm employees generally know the risks associated with the tasks that they perform day to day, however a combination of familiarity, complacency, fatigue, stress et cetera, can be the difference between business as usual and tragedy on farm” says Mr Charles Armstrong, Chair of Farmsafe Australia.

That is why the importance of on farm inductions, site specific risk assessments with follow up mitigation techniques and daily toolbox talks cannot be stressed enough. Inductions ensure that anyone new to the farm is familiar with the safety risks on farm and has basic information on how to avoid those risks. Site specific risk assessments and mitigation techniques ensure that farmers have considered all possible sources of danger and have put controls in place to minimise or eliminate those risks and regular toolbox talks open up the lines of communication for all employees to be aware of new or existing issues. These processes continually draw employee's attention back to the risks, even in jobs that they have been performing for most of their lives.

As part of Farmsafe Australia's revitalisation project, a new suite of downloadable toolbox talks will soon be made available to Aussie farmers for free. Just like the name implies, they are 5-minute fact sheets that can be chatted through while employees finish their morning coffees in the workshop and then easily stored in a clipboard in the toolbox.

Committed to keeping you safer on Australian Farms

“Unfortunately, the other factor that prevents the risk assessment method from being as effective as it should be is often the risk culture that is associated with farming” states Mr Armstrong.

Risk culture is the social acceptance of the processes surrounding the identification, communication and management of risk.

In farming, risk culture often sounds like; She’ll be right, mate, I’m only driving at slow speeds on the quad so I don’t need a helmet or I’ve done it this way longer than you’ve been walking.

“Driving cultural change towards best practice safety approaches is not always popular as it forces each and every one of us to look in the mirror and face the facts that every day, we make choices, or deflect the responsibility of making choices, that could severely injure or even kill ourselves or those we care about” stated Mr Armstrong.

“It might mean that we have to face the uncomfortable conversation with a contractor about wearing personal protective equipment while mixing the chemicals to go in the spray rig or telling our father that we want to change the yard configuration that he has worked in for the last forty years because we feel that there are stock handling issues, or purchasing rollover protection for the farm quad bike.

“These aren’t easy conversations, but they can mean the difference between high insurance claims, life-altering injuries and even death.”

So, if anything is worth the risk, these conversations are.