

MEDIA RELEASE
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COMPLACENCY - A SILENT KILLER ON AUSSIE FARMS

In 2021, 58.7 per cent of farm fatalities were farmers over the age of 45. With time and experience in the industry, complacency can often creep in and be an underlying risk for injury or fatality.

It would be difficult to measure or gauge through statistics, but over familiarity or 'taking short cuts' in an otherwise dangerous process is often a precursor to a serious incident.

Canadian born Stevi Howdle, who operates a small horse property with her husband in NSW and is also the Executive Officer at FarmSafe Australia (currently on maternity leave), spoke about the importance of always remaining vigilant on-farm, regardless of how many times you have done a task before

"Moving to Australia was a big wake up call for me with regards to safety, as I was encountering so many different farming environments and practices. I would scan the ground before jumping out of my ute, because I was terrified of stepping on a snake. Or I would take ten minutes to reverse the feed cart because I was driving from the opposite side of the vehicle," Ms Howdle said.

"But it didn't take too long before I noticed complacency beginning to creep in."

As Stevi settled into life in Australia, her confidence and efficiency with completing tasks grew. But her time spent assessing the risks shrank. Stevi found herself rushing through what she calls 'choice points'.

"Choice points are those moments where you have an opportunity to do something different. There is always a choice point that flashes to mind after a near miss or an injury.

"A few years back, I had a really scary near miss that could have ended my life in quite a gruesome manner. After a very rainy night, I was driving down a hill to enter a paddock when the ute began to slide, very slowly, but I didn't have control. The ute slid sideways into the plain wire fence and finally came to a stop with an almighty bang."

"I jumped out of the ute and saw a star picket had flipped, pierced the bottom of the ute, and come straight up under my seat."

Stevi recognises that although the result would have been nearly impossible for her to anticipate, the risk of losing control of the vehicle had been pretty clear, and the encounter made her realise that there are many risks and dangers that can be seen and addressed in advance.

"Looking back, I knew the hill was too slippery to drive straight down – I could have chosen to drive on an angle or even walked down. But I was intent on getting the job done, fast. For farmers, income is dependent on the quality and quantity of our product and we try to squeeze in as much work as we can every day to increase that yield – rushing seems to become part of every day, and that is a risk in itself."

Another issue with complacency is that farmers most farmers have a detailed understanding of the hazards on their farm, however risks can arise when these hazards are not communicated to visitors.

Felicity Richards, Chairperson at Farmsafe Australia, had her own wakeup call when it comes to complacency.

"There was a truck on my property that drove into a telegraph pole and knocked down a power line. Thankfully no one was injured, and while it was a cheap lesson, it reminded me of the importance of ensuring that all visitors know safety protocols. I realised I need to improve the signage in the entrance to my farm so that people are more aware of immediate safety measures in the case of an emergency."

"I feel like there is a general sense of complacency to signage around farms. Visitors and non-workers won't be aware of the safety protocols and dangers at a farm, and so that needs to be signposted correctly. Otherwise, that incident with the truck could have ended much worse."

This Farm Safety Week, Farmsafe Australia are encouraging farmers to just take a moment to consider the intangible factors that can impact safety on-farm.

“Every farmer understands the unique risks that come with working on their own farm. Taking one extra moment to weigh up factors such as fatigue, mental health or complacency is an important step towards creating a safer environment.”

To find out more about safety resources and how to keep yourself and your family safe, visit: farmsafe.org.au

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