

Health and safety management on dairy farms

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Summary

- There are strong legal duties in place requiring management of safety, health and welfare on dairy farms.
- Injury levels have increased on dairy farms in recent years.
- Completion and implementation of a Risk Assessment Document is a key step to managing farm health and safety.

Introduction

Injury or ill-health causes tragedy, pain and suffering. It also impacts on the farm as a business due to loss of production, poor productivity and reduced levels of motivation. Most accidents and illnesses in farming are preventable and can be managed through risk management, planning and careful work organisation. The owners/managers of all workplaces have legal duties to manage safety, health and welfare under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 and associated regulations. Non-compliance with these legal duties leaves the persons responsible liable to criminal prosecution. Excellent standards of safety, health and welfare should always be the aim and these can greatly support meeting business goals and attracting and retaining staff. Dairy farming in Ireland has undergone major expansion following milk quota removal which is set to continue into the future. This expansion has led to increased labour input of both family and employed labour. Good time management, farm buildings, equipment and facilities allows work to be completed in a well-organised and safe way.

Accident profile of dairy farming in Ireland

Fatal farm accident data shows that 19% of fatal accidents occurred on dairy farms which is higher than the proportion of farms in dairying (16.7%). By age; 49% of accident victims on dairy farms were aged 60 or older (Figure 1).

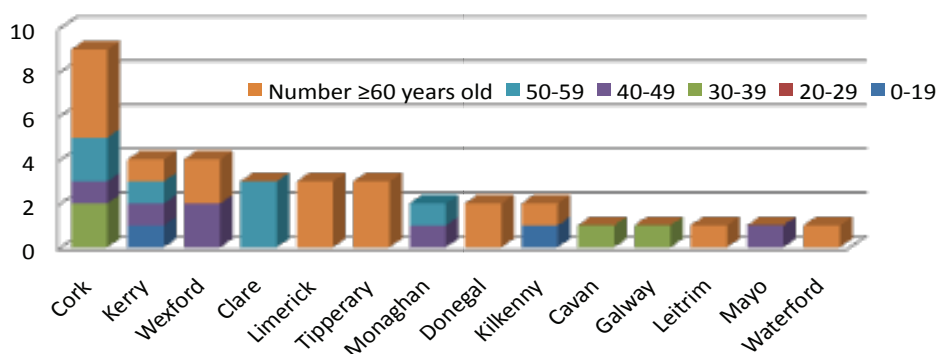


Figure 1. Profile of Dairy farm fatalities by County and Age (Source: H.S.A.)

Teagasc NFS estimates farm injury levels at regular intervals. The most recent survey in 2018 indicates that accidents on dairy farms were 50% higher than for the survey completed six years previously. The 2018 survey found that 18% of dairy farms had an accident over the previous 5-year period compared with 12% for the previous survey. The accidents reported were associated with: livestock 37%; farm vehicles/ machinery 23%; chainsaws and timber 13%; buildings 5% and other 7%.

Legal duties of Dairy farmers and employees to implement SHWW

The purpose of the Safety Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005 is to ensure that work is organised and carried out so that the risk of accidents and ill-health is reduced to the minimum level. Welfare refers to such issues as organising work to manage stress and providing washing facilities and conveniences for persons at work. The Act requires that safety, health and welfare be secured 'so far as is reasonably practicable'. An employer has the predominant duty for protecting the safety, health and welfare of their employees and all affected by work activity. This includes providing and maintaining; a safe place of work, safe machinery and equipment and safe systems and organisation of work. The employer must provide information, instruction and training to staff on workplace hazards and risks. Where a risk cannot be eliminated, suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) must be provided and maintained. Emergency plans such as arrangements to contact emergency services, first aid and fire precautions must be prepared and updated. An employer must seek competent advice if they do not know the solution to a safety, health or welfare problem.

Employees have the following duties: co-operate with their employer; take care to avoid injury to themselves and others; report to their employer defects in the place or system of work which might be a hazard and use all items of equipment or PPE in a safe manner. Employers and employees must safeguard persons who are not their employees such as members of the public. Self-employed farmers must apply the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 (2005 Act) legal requirements to all who live and work on the farm.

Duty to complete a risk assessment

A Risk Assessment and Code of Practice have been prepared for the Agricultural sector under the 2005 Act and these are available on the HSA and Teagasc websites. Teagasc and accredited consultants provide half-day training on completing the Risk Assessment document. Completion of the Risk Assessment document is also a requirement for both Quality Assurance Schemes and TAMSII grant payment.

Conclusions

Active and on-going management of farm safety, health and welfare is both necessary and mandatory in law. It is also a vital component of operating and managing a progressive dairy enterprise. Further information and guidance on all aspects of farm safety, health and welfare is available at www.hsa.ie and at www.teagasc.ie/health_safety/