



Getting to grips with health and safety – Andrew Morrison

“Someone once told me an old saying: ‘there are more people killed in the jungle by mosquitoes than by tigers,’” says farmer and agribusiness director Andrew Morrison.

“This has stuck with me whilst addressing health and safety on our farms. In no way am I downplaying the tragedy of workplace deaths on farms but it is also important to delve into the data and examine the mosquito bites – the injuries on farms as opposed to fatalities.”

Andrew sees that everyday farm activity poses risks that can be dealt with if you make the effort to figure out what it is.

The big things that can kill you are important, but so is putting in place the systems that allow you to deal with everything else.

Andrew and Lisa live on a 150-hectare block in Gore, farming 1,800 ewes and 470 hoggets. Andrew’s family have been farming in Southland since 1875 and he grew up just along the road, where his parents and brother still farm.

“Family succession and communities are a big part of the rural fabric, so I really see the value in protecting my successors and the people we live and work with in our community,” says Andrew.

“It’s crucial we have the processes and culture in place to create a safe work environment.”

Andrew sits on numerous boards, including Balance Agri-nutrients, Beef + Lamb New Zealand (B+LNZ), New Zealand Meat Board, Ovis Management Ltd, and the Wool Research Organisation of New Zealand, so he’s well-connected in farming circles. He also works with the Pastoral Greenhouse Gas Research Consortium and the Agricultural Leaders Health and Safety Action Group.

“In these roles, I get to see the intense focus the rural sector puts on health and safety – from one-man farms to major operations. For example, one of these organisations has a workforce of 750.

These people are highly valued by the organisation, so it’s crucial we have the processes and culture in place to create a safe work environment.”

Andrew’s second farm, 890 Ha of rolling pasture and improved tussock at Kuriwao Gorge near Clinton in Southland, is run by farm manager Tim Williams.

“Tim’s been with us 10 years, he manages 5,000 ewes, 1,400 hoggets and 170 cows and we value him hugely,” says Andrew.

“I believe farmers have always cared about the safety of their people. However, sometimes in the agricultural sector, we make some bad decisions, often because we are busy and tired.”

Andrew says that at first Tim was wary about the prospect of formalising health and safety processes at Kuriwao.

“So, Lisa, Tim and I got in the ute, and we invited a neighbour along too, and we drove around the farm to identify the hazards. “It was a very good experience, having several different sets of eyes see things differently. We drew up our hazard map together and used different colour highlighter pens to mark-up hazards.

“For instance, the tussock blocks are all marked as ‘high risk’ and the rule is you stay on the track. As part of this, track maintenance is important and we’ve been building some new tracks in the tussock blocks.

“We’ve marked all the creeks and water and all the wires and power lines. We run copies off as needed and it’s really useful for inductions with aerial spreaders and contractors.

“If someone is going into the paddocks for jobs like spreading fertiliser, you also have to touch base with the farmer first so they can warn you about any hazards like steep ground or drop-offs.”

While learning how to create his own hazard map, Andrew asked to see a progressive neighbour’s existing plan.

“It was scrawled all over as they’d added new things as they came up,” said Andrew. “That’s what ours is like now. It doesn’t have to be a tidy document, it’s a live one that grows and evolves.

“Farmers have a lot on their plates nowadays and changes to the Health and Safety at Work Act might seem overwhelming, but it’s about breaking it down into do-ables. It’s direction, not perfection.”

“But we still miss stuff and recently one of the dogs got its foot stuck as it slipped on the quad bike and the staff member tried to free it and got bitten. That was a lost-time injury.

“When you’ve been round the block a few times, like me, you know you should wrap your jacket round the dog’s head first then extract it. That was something I hadn’t thought to flag up to young staff, but it’s in the hazard plan now.”

Andrew says he has always made sure tractors and other farm vehicles are well maintained with tyres changed regularly.

“Tim has a side-by-side rather than a quad. We also have a quad but we make sure we assess people’s ability and safety levels before we let any staff drive it, or the tractors. We also don’t let them use chainsaws unless they have done a chainsaw course.

“Andrew also sees that innovation is a good tool to take risk out of tasks. We had a young woman working with us who had struggled with the weight of dead stock, so Tim got a trailer and put a winch on the front and a roller on the back, so if she had to deal with a dead sheep she didn’t have to lift it. This kind of innovation helps everyone on the farm stay safe. This is a mosquito bite. It seems small but highlights the thought process of preventing a back injury.

“I’ve recently bought two cattle crushes. That was a big investment but it means that we can restrain cattle when we are handling them.”

At B+LNZ’s health and safety workshops run for farmers, many of the farmers were reticent until they realised they were already doing a lot of what they needed to, says Andrew.

“It’s about building on strengths that farmers and their families have in place and it’s really about continuing to make health and safety part of business as usual.

“Farmers have a lot on their plates nowadays and changes to the Health and Safety at Work Act might seem overwhelming, but it’s about breaking it down into do-ables. It’s direction, not perfection.

“It’s still a learning curve. We’re on a journey – a lot of what we are doing is not that different to what we have always done but it’s about encouraging people to take a few minutes, to stop and reflect then look for the safest option and reduce the risk of making those bad choices. Have I got it nailed? No – but we are working hard at learning.”

WORKER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The best outcomes are achieved when a business and its workers work together on health and safety. Worker Engagement and Participation is about having planned ways for:

- workers to give input on issues which will (or are likely to) affect their health or safety. This includes asking for and taking into account their views
- workers to improve work health and safety on an ongoing basis (eg by raising concerns or suggesting improvements).

This will help you and your business make better decisions – and keep your people and productivity thriving.

KEY POINTS

- Creating a safe work environment starts with getting buy-in from our workers.
- Encouraging worker feedback leads to innovative ideas for health and safety improvement.

For more examples and information visit worksafe.govt.nz