



Significant Incident Summary No. 5

Farm worker entangled in rotating machinery – fatal incident

Background

A worker at a farm was fatally injured when he became entangled in the rotating parts of a plastic mulch retriever (PMR) attached to the rear of a tractor. The incident occurred while the operator was working alone near the spinning winder mechanism that was collecting plastic sheeting from a row of plants. The plastic sheet was approximately 93 metres long.

Contributory factors

- The PMR control lever in the tractor cabin was held in the on-position with a piece of string. This meant the PMR remained in operation even when the operator left the tractor cabin.
- The PMR could only be stopped by operating the controls inside the cabin of the tractor. The operator on the ground near the attachment had no way to stop the plant and could not reach the levers inside the cabin.
- It was not practicable to guard the rotating parts of the PMR.
- The supplier of the PMR had not provided any instructions for the safe operation of the plant.
- The operator was working alone.

Actions required

Work health and safety legislation requires the person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) to ensure that risks to the health and safety of workers, and others, in relation to the use and operation of plant are eliminated. If that is not possible, risks must be minimised so far as is reasonably practicable.

PCBUs must ensure:

- an operator always remains at the controls in the tractor cabin.
- controls and safety equipment on plant or machinery are never overridden, nullified or bypassed.
- workers are provided with information, instruction and training on how to identify hazards associated with moving and rotating plant and how to safely operate plant and control risks.

- workers do not have loose items of clothing, hair, jewellery, or other items that may get caught by moving parts.
- an exclusion zone is maintained so that no person comes near the exposed moving parts of the plant while it is operating.

Recommendations

The risk of serious or fatal injuries, from becoming entangled or crushed, exists if a person can contact moving parts of plant. The risk is increased if a person is working close to unguarded moving parts.

A suitable emergency stop device such as a stop button should be fitted that is easy to access and activate in the event of an emergency, such as an entanglement. However, an emergency stop device does not stop an incident from occurring as a person being pulled into a machine may not be able to reach and activate the stop device.

A minimum of two workers are required to safely conduct the retrieval process of plastic sheets. A spotter is needed to make sure the plastic sheet is collecting correctly, while the second worker has direct control of the plant.

The spotter must remain outside the exclusion zone. The operator must be trained to immediately stop the rotating plant if the spotter or any other person enters the exclusion zone.

Tractors can be fitted with a variety of attachments and implements, with each different attachment introducing a new set of hazards. Planning and selecting the correct equipment for the intended task and terrain is an important step in managing risks.

References and further information

Department of Local Government, Industry, Regulation and Safety

WorkSafe

- [Safe use of tractors with attachments – a handbook for workplaces](#)

Safe Work Australia

- [Guide for managing the risks of machinery in rural workplaces](#)

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