

HEALTH & SAFETY BULLETIN

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Ceres Rural's Health & Safety Bulletin. Each quarter, we update you on industry news, topical issues, and safety alerts with the aim of supporting you in achieving best practice on your farm or estate. This edition provides dos and don'ts for the safe charging of batteries, and insights into the Health & Safety Executive's recently published Annual Report that directly affect farm and estate businesses across the United Kingdom. It continues by outlining what farms and estates need to know about the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002. The bulletin then suggests that reporting of and learning from significant near misses can allow farms and estates to build a proactive safety culture and to reduce accidents and incidents. It also provides a winter reminder of mud on the road and the practical measures that farms and estates can take to mitigate this hazard. Finally, three recent health and safety accidents and prosecutions are explained, including commentary from the Health & Safety Executive's investigation of each case.

SAFE CHARGING OF BATTERIES

From tractors and telehandlers to electric fencing units and bird scarers, batteries are essential across most farms and estates. However, charging and maintaining them in workshops or machinery sheds can introduce serious hazards if not managed properly. Fires, explosions, acid burns and toxic gas exposure have all occurred during battery charging, but are nearly always preventable with the right precautions.

IN ORDER TO ENSURE SAFE CHARGING OF BATTERIES:

DO

- Charge batteries in a clean, dry and well-ventilated area to prevent the build-up of hydrogen gas.
- Inspect batteries before charging: look for cracks, swelling, leaking electrolyte, damaged terminals or frayed cables.
- Ensure chargers are appropriate for the battery type (e.g. lithium batteries require specific smart chargers).
- Charge batteries away from sources of ignition such as pillar drills or bench grinders and keep charging areas free of combustible materials.
- Use single-ended tools with insulated handles and wear eye protection and gloves when handling or connecting batteries.
- Connect the charger correctly: positive to positive, negative to negative. Use manufacturer-recommended charging setting.
- Secure batteries so they cannot tip over or be knocked from benches during charging.
- Label dedicated charging stations and maintain clear floor space to avoid trips and cable hazards.
- Regularly maintain chargers and check cable condition, plugs and leads for signs of overheating or damage.
- Store battery electrolyte, spill kits and a class B/C fire extinguisher nearby in case of emergencies.

DO NOT

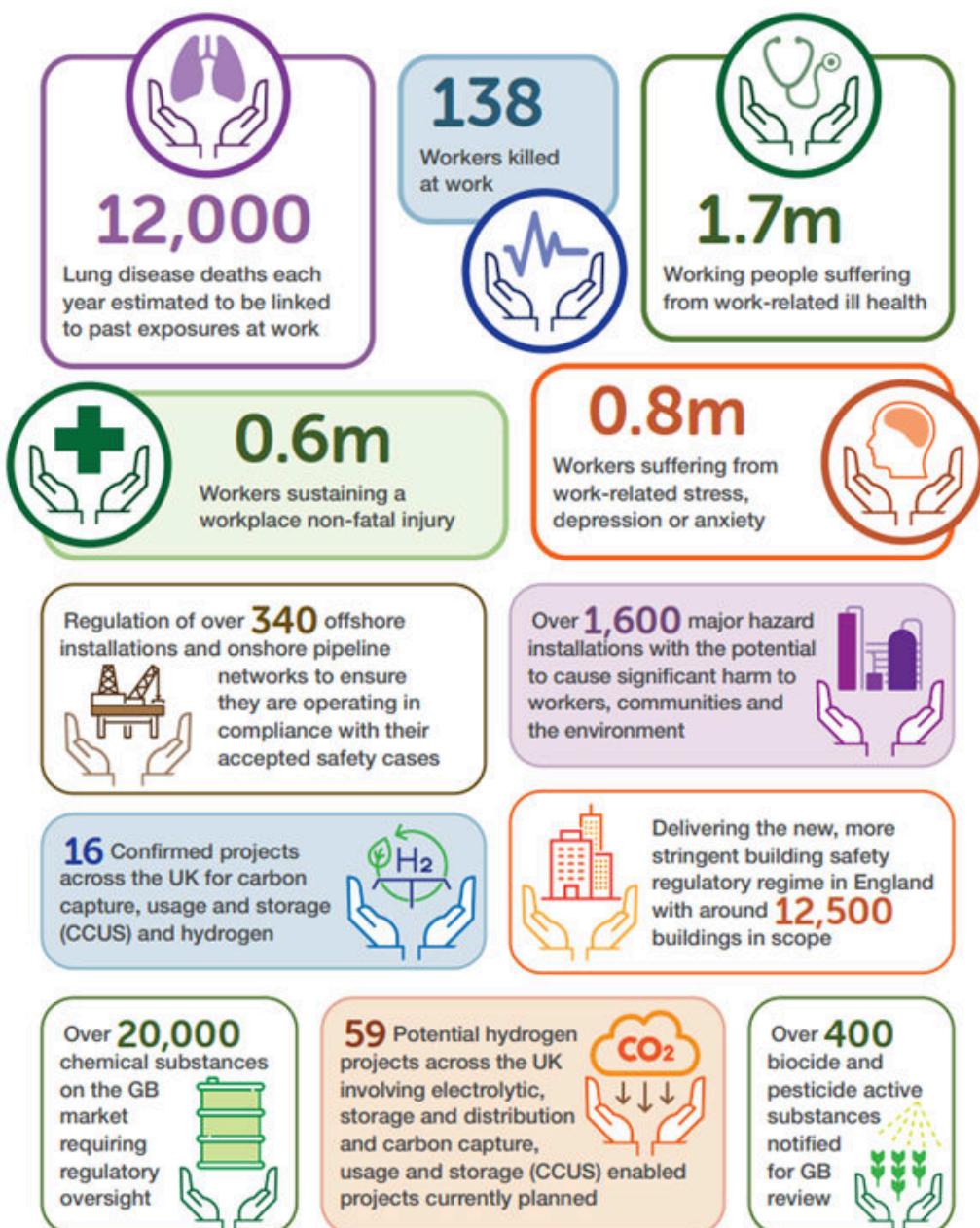
- Charge batteries near naked flames, heaters, welders, grinders or smoking areas as hydrogen gas is highly explosive.
- Overcharge batteries: this can cause overheating, gassing and internal damage leading to fire or explosion.
- Attempt to charge visibly damaged or frozen batteries: dispose of them safely.
- Use improvised or homemade chargers or mix chargers between incompatible battery types.
- Allow metal objects (e.g. spanners, screws or wire) to rest on top of batteries where they may short-circuit terminals.
- Place batteries directly on damp floors, which can increase self-discharge and corrosion.
- Ignore overheating: disconnect immediately if the battery or charger becomes unusually hot.
- Charge lithium batteries unattended overnight unless the charger and setting are specifically designed for this.
- Leave trailing cables across entrances, work areas or vehicle routes.

For further information, see: [Using Electric Storage Batteries Safely](#)

HEALTH & SAFETY EXECUTIVE

ANNUAL REPORT

The Health & Safety Executive's (HSE) recently published Annual Report for 2024-25 offers important insights that directly affect farm and estate businesses across the United Kingdom (UK). Agriculture remains one of the country's highest risk sectors and the report highlights several developments and priorities that farm and estate owners and managers should be aware of. While extending much wider than just the agricultural sector, the report uses the following infographic to remind readers of the challenges faced.



CONTINUED FOCUS ON WORK-RELATED ILL HEALTH

Work-related ill health remains a major challenge, with 1.7 million people affected nationally. Of particular relevance to farming is the rise in musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and stress-related illness. HSE carried out almost 3,000 MSD-focused inspections, finding that many businesses still rely heavily on lifting technique and 'rotating jobs' rather than redesigning tasks to remove strain. Farms should review manual handling and repetitive tasks such as lifting feed bags, moving livestock, milking duties and prolonged machinery operation.

HSE also reported that work-related stress now accounts for almost half of all UK work-related illness. Although often overlooked in rural businesses, stress has a direct impact on farm safety, concentration and decision-making. HSE's Working Minds campaign now has thousands of members and offers simple, practical tools for small businesses.

ASBESTOS & OLDER FARM BUILDINGS

HSE continues to prioritise the risks from asbestos, especially in older agricultural buildings. Inspections found that around one in ten duty holders had failings in their management systems and asbestos containing materials (ACMs) were found in over a quarter of inspected sites. With many agricultural buildings dating from periods when ACMs were widely used, it is essential that farms and estates know where asbestos is located, keep an up-to-date asbestos management plan and ensure contractors follow correct procedures. Updated guidance and new awareness videos are now available to improve understanding of what asbestos looks like and how to manage it safely.

NOISE, DUST & RESPIRATORY RISKS

HSE carried out 1,700 assessments on noise-related hearing loss and issued over 100 improvement notices. This acts as a reminder that agriculture still has widespread harmful noise exposure from livestock, machinery and grain handling infrastructure. The report also highlights renewed efforts to reduce exposure to respirable crystalline silica (RCS), a risk for farms and estates carrying out stone cutting, building work or operating with certain soil types.

REGULATION & ENFORCEMENT

Across all sectors, HSE completed over 13,200 inspections and 4,400 enforcement notices. For agriculture, this reinforces the need for proactive safety management. Where serious breaches occurred (e.g. falls from height and unsafe machinery maintenance), fines continue to be substantial. HSE secured £33 million in fines across all industries and a 96% prosecution conviction rate.

MENTAL HEALTH & WORKFORCE WELLBEING

HSE reports that mental health problems remain the leading cause of long-term absence, accounting for 54% of cases. In farming – where lone working, weather extremes, rising costs, subdued commodity prices, financial pressures, long hours and isolation are common – this should prompt farms and estates to check in regularly with staff and family members, review workload and rest patterns and use HSE's free guidance for supporting workers with long-term conditions.

EMERGING ISSUES: NET ZERO & NEW TECHNOLOGIES

While not farm-specific, the report outlines HSE's growing involvement in hydrogen, carbon capture and new energy systems. Farms and estates investing in renewables – such as hydrogen-ready equipment, battery storage or new power systems – should expect evolving safety guidance in the coming years.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR FARMS & ESTATES:

- Review manual handling tasks to redesign work rather than rely on 'lifting correctly'.
- Reassess asbestos risks in older farm buildings.
- Protect against noise and dust in workshops, grain stores and livestock buildings.
- Prioritise mental health and wellbeing as part of safety management.
- Keep machinery maintenance, work at height controls and training up to date to avoid enforcement action.

The HSE's message is clear: health risks now demand the same attention as traditional safety hazards. For farms and estates, where physical strain, ageing buildings and demanding work conditions are common, taking proactive steps now will reduce accidents, prevent illness and protect the workforce for the long term.

For further information, see: [Health & Safety Executive Annual Report](#)

COSHH REGULATIONS:

WHAT FARM & ESTATES NEED TO KNOW

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) remain one of the most important pieces of health and safety legislation for the agricultural sector. Farms and estates routinely handle or generate a wide range of hazardous substances, from pesticides and veterinary medicines to grain dust, welding fumes and silage gases. Understanding COSHH is essential not only for compliance, but for protecting the long term health of staff and reducing avoidable incidents.

WHAT COSHH COVERS

COSHH provides a regulatory framework for managing the risks posed by hazardous substances used or generated during work activities. These include chemicals, biological agents, dusts, fumes, vapours and aerosols – all common within agricultural settings. In short, COSHH requires employers to identify hazardous substances, assess how they may cause harm and put in place appropriate control measures to reduce exposure.

WHY COSHH MATTERS ON FARMS

Agriculture relies heavily on substances that can cause both acute and long term health effects. Risks range from corrosive or toxic chemical exposures to chronic conditions such as dermatitis, respiratory sensitisation and certain cancers. COSHH provides a structured approach to managing these risks, helping employers minimise health impacts through prevention, control and ongoing monitoring. Compliance also plays a key role in environmental protection, requiring safe storage and disposal of hazardous wastes. Failing to comply can result in significant legal and financial consequences, including unlimited fines and, in some cases, imprisonment.

EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITIES UNDER COSHH

Farms and estates must take a systematic approach to controlling hazardous substances. Key duties include:

- Identifying and assessing substances by carrying out risk assessments to identify risks and determine who may be affected and how.
- Preventing or adequately controlling exposure by following a hierarchy of elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative controls and personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Providing information, instruction and training to staff, who must be informed of the risks associated with substances they handle or encounter, and trained in their safe use, storage and disposal. COSHH also requires clear labelling and access to safety data sheets.
- Monitoring, health surveillance and record keeping: where necessary, employers must monitor exposure levels and provide health surveillance, particularly for substances known to cause asthma, dermatitis or long term health effects.
- Preparing for emergencies including spillages, accidental exposures, chemical reactions and silage-related gas releases. Staff must understand what actions to take and what equipment to use.

RECENT & RELEVANT UPDATES

Agricultural workplaces have seen a number of COSHH related updates in recent years. For example, 2025 changes included new grain dust exposure limits and the discontinuation of the COSHH e-tool, requiring farms to migrate any digital COSHH assessments to alternative systems. While the core legal duties of COSHH remain consistent, farms and estates should stay aware of updated HSE guidance, sector specific recommendations and any changes to associated regulations such as REACH, pesticide legislation or hazardous waste disposal standards.

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR FARMS & ESTATES

Effective COSHH management is essential in agriculture, where hazardous substances are part of daily operations. By identifying risks, implementing robust control measures and maintaining strong training and monitoring systems, farms and estates can significantly reduce work related illness, protect the environment and meet their legal obligations under UK health and safety law. COSHH compliance not only improves day-to-day safety but also supports sustainable, responsible farm and estate management in the long term.

NEAR MISS RECORDING

Accident books are a familiar sight across farms and estates – most businesses in the sector understand their legal duty to record (and sometimes report) workplace injuries and incidents. These records provide essential information for post-incident review, insurance and compliance with the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases & Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013. But while accident recording is well embedded in agricultural businesses, one area often overlooked and yet of equal importance, is the reporting of and learning from significant near misses.

WHY ACCIDENT BOOKS AREN'T ENOUGH

Accident book entries tell us what has gone wrong, but often only after someone has been hurt or property has been damaged. By the time an incident reaches the accident book, the opportunity to prevent harm has already passed. Relying solely on accident data means businesses operate reactively, waiting for something serious enough to cause injury before underlying risks are identified.

THE POWER OF NEAR MISS REPORTING

A near miss is any event that could have caused injury, ill health or damage but didn't, often due to luck or quick action. In high-risk environments like farms and estates, these events are early warning signs: they highlight weak points in systems, equipment, behaviours or procedures long before an accident occurs. Examples include:

- Jumping clear of an unsighted reversing vehicle.
- A PTO guard beginning to fail during operation.
- A chemical container found leaking in a store.
- Livestock breaking through a poorly maintained fence or gate.
- A heavy item falling from a mezzanine or big bale falling from a stack.
- Entering a grain bin without a harness.

Each of these situations could easily have resulted in an injury or fatality. When they go unreported, important learning opportunities are lost.

DRIVING BETTER PERFORMANCE THROUGH LEARNING

Capturing near misses allows farms and estates to build a proactive safety culture. When patterns are spotted – such as repeated slips in the dairy or frequent machinery close calls – controls can be implemented before someone gets hurt. Encouraging near miss reporting also:

- Improves risk awareness across teams.
- Engages staff by involving them in safety improvements.
- Highlights training needs and gaps in understanding.
- Strengthens preventative maintenance and equipment inspection routines.
- Supports continuous improvement, rather than waiting for accidents to escalate.

Farms and estates that actively record and act on near misses often see reductions in accidents and incidents over time because they are tackling risks earlier and more systematically.

Some staff hesitate to report near misses because they fear blame or fault or believe the issue not to be serious. A strong safety culture removes this barrier: farm and estate owners and managers can encourage reporting by emphasising that near miss reporting is not about fault or criticism, making reporting simple, sharing learnings openly, acting promptly on information received and acknowledging staff who contribute to identifying hazards. Lastly, when staff see that reports lead to genuine improvements (e.g. fixed lighting, new guards or changes in livestock handling) they become more willing to speak up.

A PRACTICAL STEP TOWARD SAFER FARMS

Accident books remain essential tools, but they capture only part of the safety picture. By combining accident records with active near miss reporting, farms and estates can shift from a reactive approach to a predictive, preventative one. This change not only reduces injuries but strengthens operational resilience, protects assets and creates a safer working environment for everyone on site. Near misses are opportunities, not warnings to be ignored: the more we learn from them, the fewer entries will result in the accident book.

WINTER REMINDER:

MUD ON THE ROAD

Wet winter conditions inevitably increase the amount of mud transferred from fields onto public roads by tractors and other farm machinery. While this is a common challenge in agriculture, the health and safety implications are serious: mud significantly reduces tyre grip, increases stopping distances and heightens the risk of skidding, making it essential that farms and estates manage this risk proactively.

Depositing mud on the highway is not simply poor practice, it is a legal offence. Farms and estates are required by the Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in their employment are not exposed to risks to their health and safety. Under the Highways Act 1980, it is unlawful to deposit anything on a public highway that interrupts or endangers other road users (these provisions allow the highway authority to require the responsible party to remove the mud and, if they fail to do so, to carry out the work themselves and recover the associated costs). Section 161 of the Act makes it an offence if mud deposited on the road leads to someone being injured or endangered. Farms and estates may also face liability under the Road Traffic Act 1988 if excessive mud on the road contributes to dangerous driving conditions.

Practically, farms and estates should:

- Prevent mud leaving fields where possible by scraping down machinery before entering public roads.
- Clean affected stretches of road promptly, ideally throughout the working day or at least by the end of the day.
- Use authorised road signage positioned for maximum visibility, such as Slippery Road or Mud on Road.
- Keep written records of decisions relating to signage and road-cleaning actions.
- Ensure staff working on or near the road remain visible, using reflective, high-visibility clothing.

ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITY

Twice yearly, we bring you examples of recent health and safety accidents and prosecutions, both from agricultural and non-agricultural settings.

Worker's Leg Amputated After Entanglement in Machinery

A 37-year-old sawmill worker suffered life-changing injuries after being dragged into moving machinery while attempting to clear a jammed log. The worker climbed onto a stationary conveyor bed and used a metal pole to shift a lodged log. However, the conveyor unexpectedly restarted and his legs were pulled into the moving chains and crushed against a stop plate. He sustained catastrophic injuries, including the amputation of his right leg below the knee and significant trauma to his left leg. He survived, but with permanent, life-altering consequences.

The HSE noted this incident was entirely preventable and stressed that lock-out procedures and safe intervention protocols remain a key area of failure, despite their critical importance. Their investigation found that the company had no adequate risk assessment for the dangerous parts of the machine and did not implement measures to prevent access to moving parts or ensure machinery was fully stopped before workers entered danger zones. In addition, workers had not been provided with suitably safe systems of work, nor with appropriate information, instruction, training or supervision to ensure safe operation of the equipment.

The company pleaded guilty to breaching Section 2(1) of the Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and was fined £160,000 plus costs of £7,396.

The HSE commented: *"The life-changing injuries sustained [...] could easily have been prevented if the company had acted to identify and manage the risks involved, put a safe system of work in place and ensured that employees were appropriately trained and supervised."*

Sub-Contractor Seriously Injured in Fall from Height

A 29-year-old sub-contractor suffered serious, long-term injuries after falling more than 15 feet through a fragile skylight while carrying out roof repair work at an industrial estate. He sustained multiple fractures, was unable to work for several months and has not regained full use of one leg. The incident occurred during a weekend push to speed up slow-moving repair work, with additional workers drafted in and pressure to complete the job. Despite the severity of the fall, the following day the company continued the roof repairs without implementing any additional safety measures.

The HSE highlighted that work at height remains one of the leading causes of fatal and major injuries in the United Kingdom, yet the company had failed to put basic protections in place, including edge protection and measures to prevent falls through fragile roof areas. Their investigation found that no adequate precautions had been taken to ensure worker safety on the roof. The company had neither erected scaffolding at roof edges nor arranged effective controls for fragile materials, leaving workers highly exposed to fall hazards. This lack of planning and risk management was deemed a significant factor in the incident.

The company pleaded guilty to breaching Regulation 6(3) of the Work at Height Regulations 2005 and was fined £80,000 plus costs of £2,630. The director who had been present throughout the work, pleaded guilty to breaching Section 37(1) of the Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and received a three-month prison sentence suspended for 12 months plus costs of £2,630.

The HSE remarked: *"These sentences should send a clear message to employers that HSE and the courts take a failure to comply with health and safety legislation extremely seriously. Too many workers are injured or killed every year as a result of falls from height [...] these incidents can be prevented if reasonably practicable measures such as scaffolding or netting are put in place to protect workers."*

Delivery Driver Killed in Forklift Truck Incident

A delivery driver was fatally injured while operating a forklift truck at a depot in West Yorkshire. As he attempted to reverse the forklift onto a trailer, the vehicle fell from the side of the trailer bed. The driver was thrown from his seat, became trapped between the forklift chassis and a neighbouring trailer, and died at the scene.

The HSE found that the forklift had not undergone a full safety inspection following repair work to its transmission before being put back into use. Post-incident examination identified several defects that should have been discovered and rectified. Investigators also found that while the company carried out thorough pre-delivery inspections for new customers, this standard was not applied when returning machines to existing customers. In addition, many employees routinely failed to wear seatbelts while operating forklift trucks and no system existed to monitor or enforce seatbelt use, despite the vehicle being fitted with one. The HSE highlighted that employers must ensure work equipment is properly maintained and inspected and that, where fitted, seatbelts must be used.

The company pleaded guilty to breaching Section 2(1) of the Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and was fined £433,550 plus costs.

The HSE remarked: "This was a tragic and preventable death [...] [the driver] was placed at undue risk by operating a machine with underlying maintenance defects, which he would have been unaware of when attempting to reverse the forklift in the dark onto a trailer with an exposed edge [...] every year there are fatal accidents caused by machinery which has not been properly maintained or inspected, and forklift truck drivers not wearing seatbelts. This case should underline to all businesses, which hire out or operate forklift trucks, the importance of keeping machinery in efficient working order and ensuring the use of seatbelts by forklift drivers is appropriately supervised."

GET IN TOUCH

If you would like to discuss any topics raised in this issue of the Health & Safety Bulletin, do not hesitate to contact our Health & Safety Guidance expert.



ROBERT GAZELY
PARTNER | SAFFRON WALDEN

robert.gazely@ceresrural.co.uk

07592 041 617