

Workplace transport safety in agriculture

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To set the scene it is worth stating that transport activities, anything to do with a moving vehicle, are the biggest killer in agricultural workplaces.

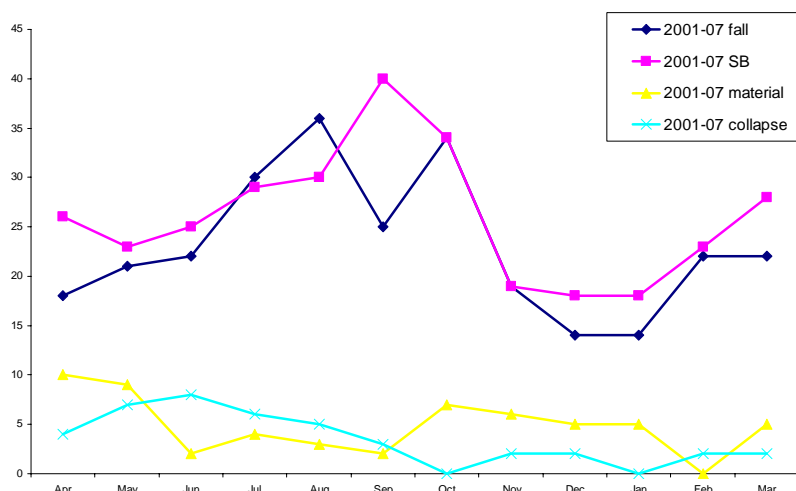
Between 2001-2007, 84 people died as a result of transport activity on farms. This represents almost a third of all the fatal accidents in agriculture for the same period. Agriculture also accounts for a quarter the transport fatalities across all industries.

The annual cost of accidents to agriculture has been estimated at £290million for 2004-05¹. If transport accidents account for a third of this then it represents approximately £400 for every farmer in Great Britain.

Both in terms of managing transport safety – and accident causation – it is convenient to look at the topic in its' main elements of site, vehicle and driver. Taking the subject of braking as an example, topography, track surface, vehicle weight, brake system, maintenance, operation etc. can fit into this model and the interactions analysed.

Within the general topic of transport, accidents are also split into four categories (struck by vehicle, fall from a vehicle, collapse of a vehicle and material falling from a vehicle). If agriculture is compared to all other industries then the relationship between these categories is the same i.e. struck by and falls from are similar in frequency and significantly higher than the others. However, one of the key differences between agriculture and other industries is the distinct seasonal accident pattern. This is hardly surprising given that the majority of transport activity occurs during harvesting in the Summer months.

Figure 1. Seasonality of agricultural transport accidents



¹ Fatal injuries in agriculture, forestry and horticulture 2005/06. Free to download www.hse.gov.uk

Research into the mechanical condition of agricultural vehicles concludes that they need to be better maintained. The legislation regarding maintenance is the same for the workplace and for on-road use and this has led to some useful joint working between HSE and the Department for Transport. A statutory scheme of examination is unlikely so the challenge is to find ways of increasing voluntary action. It is worth pointing out that although the total number of defects found was high, and some might be considered insignificant, some of the individual failures do give rise for concern. For example, 12% of tractors had defective handbrakes. This should be considered in the context that another unusual aspect of agricultural transport accidents is that it is often the driver who is injured in struck by incidents.

There is a general lack of understanding of tractor/trailer brake issues and as tractor speeds and loads increase there is increasing potential for accidents. The trailer braking research currently being carried out is starting to provide a very interesting insight into this area.

HSE remains committed to reducing harm in the workplace and will work with stakeholders where there are common objectives. Research, communication, Standards, industry initiatives, new and retro-fit technology are all areas where opportunities exist for collaboration across the whole industry.