



## Ignoring fatigue a slippery slope for health and safety on the farm

**Byline: Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association**

We often hear farmers say, ‘I’ll sleep when the busy season is over.’ But that outlook, even if intended jokingly, is a slippery slope for health and safety considerations.

While it’s no secret that long and tiring days go hand in hand with farming, that doesn’t mean becoming complacent about the implications of working while fatigued. Because ignoring the signs of fatigue can put yourself and others around you at risk.

Susan Sawatzky is president and founder of In-Scope Solutions, a health and safety consulting company specializing in fatigue and stress management. She says that while sleep is vital to our health and wellness, its importance is often overlooked.

“It’s interesting how much society does not recognize the importance of sleep,” Sawatzky explains. “We talk a great deal about the importance of nutrition and exercise, but we don’t often emphasize how important sleep is.”

According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, research has shown that being awake for 17 hours is equivalent to a blood-alcohol level of 0.05, while being awake for 21 hours equals a blood-alcohol level of 0.08, the legal limit in Canada. Sawatzky notes that though fatigue is more likely to contribute to workplace impairment than drugs or alcohol, unlike drugs and alcohol, which can be measured to assess risk, it is often difficult to accurately measure fatigue in the workplace.

“I personally define fatigue as an impairment in mental and physical abilities ... this is what the real risk of fatigue is,” explains Sawatzky. “Fatigue impairs our physical and mental abilities, which can then cause workplace incidents.”

Fatigue tends to impact people in waves, says Sawatzky. The various stages involve impacts to alertness, emotional capabilities (becoming more frustrated and upset), mental abilities (difficulty concentrating and making decisions), and, finally, physical



impacts that reduce fine and gross motor coordination. The physical implications of fatigue can also include microsleep, an unplanned brief episode of sleep that can happen anywhere – even while driving.

Karleen Clark has seen first-hand the impact that fatigue can have during long hours in the field.

Clark, who, along with family members, operates KCL Cattle Company, a feedlot and farming operation in southern Alberta, explains that an incident occurred on the farm last fall near the end of harvest. After finishing a field around midnight one night, the crew decided to move the equipment to be ready to start the new field in the morning. While moving a piece of equipment, one of the workers briefly nodded off and ran into the machine in front of him.

“There were no injuries, just damage to our header. It was certainly a best-case scenario when you think of farm accidents, but it definitely opened all of our eyes more to the issue of fatigue,” explains Clark, noting that if they hadn’t found a replacement header the next day, the incident could have caused delays in the middle of the busy season.

While fatigue is one of the more common hazards on the farm, it’s also one of the most underestimated. A contributing factor, says Clark, is the farmer mentality to keep going until work is done, regardless of the hour.

“I think it’s really hard to get farmers out of the mindset of ignoring fatigue because it’s almost ingrained in them that if even if you’re tired, you keep going because you have to get the crops off,” says Clark.

“I’ve had conversations with people in farming where I’ve stressed that the delays of an incident due to fatigue can be significantly longer than a delay to take a bit of rest. Asking for a break can be hard with the farming mentality, but it’s important to take breaks when you can.”

Moreover, not addressing fatigue as a safety hazard on the farm can have financial repercussions. According to the National Safety Council in the United States, fatigued workers cost employers \$1,200 to \$3,100 per employee annually in lost productivity.



And those costs are worth keeping in mind considering that a Conference Board of Canada survey found that 27% of Canadian workers report being fatigued most days or every day during a typical work week.

“Fatigue is something that all farmers need to think about more. When you think about the impact that even a small incident can have on farming operations, it’s worth taking the time to be safe and that includes addressing fatigue,” explains Clark, adding that her family’s farm will be doing more to inform workers about best practices for managing fatigue.

In addition to posing immediate safety risks, fatigue can also impact an individual’s mental well-being. Sawatzky says a significant amount of research shows a strong correlation between fatigue and increased levels of depression and anxiety. “In fact, there is not a single mental illness that does not have some form of sleep issue associated with it,” she explains.

When it comes to managing fatigue, one of the most important strategies is being aware of the effects of fatigue. And that means being proactive with addressing fatigue.

“Harvest is responsible for a significant portion of the yearly income, so it makes sense that farmers will work late into the night to get the crops off. The issue with this, of course, is that it leads to fatigue. What farmers need to do is proactively manage these risks as much as possible,” Sawatzky explains. “Simple solutions like taking a short 10-minute nap in the cab of a truck or tractor can go a long way toward reducing the likelihood of damaging equipment or having someone get hurt.”

Other effective strategies for managing fatigue include using caffeine appropriately, taking breaks, checking in on each other, eating healthy meals, and strategically planning work to avoid doing safety-sensitive tasks in the evening.

While there’s no one-size-fits-all solution for fatigue, acknowledging it as an everyday safety hazard on the farm and including fatigue management in farm safety plans can greatly help reduce risk.



“Talking about fatigue is an important conversation to have on any farm,” says Clark. “Every person working on a farm needs to be aware of the signs of fatigue and know how to combat it.”

For more than a decade, CASA has been raising awareness about the importance of safety on Canadian farms through Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, which takes place every year during the third week of March. In 2023, CASW is presented in partnership with key partners Farm Credit Canada and Decisive Farming by TELUS Agriculture. Other sponsors include CN, Canadian Canola Growers Association, Syngenta, and Fertilizer Canada.