



Farmsafe WA Alliance

Safety Needs Survey Report Summary

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Executive Summary

The Safety Needs Analysis Survey was designed to go straight to the source, the West Australian farmer, to investigate the safety practices on West Australian farms and uncover the solutions, services and assistance the farming community would like to receive from Farmsafe WA Alliance. The survey was distributed and conducted between June and October 2010 and consequently analysed.

With no separate funding secured to conduct this much needed survey, Farmsafe WA Alliance decided to use their in-house resources. Support was forthcoming from Alliance Members who helped with the structure and dissemination of the questionnaire. Importantly, Curtin University also offered their time and own resources to conduct telephone canvassing over a period of two months, and assisted with the analysis report.

Farmsafe WA Alliance initially utilised its database for the purpose of the survey, where an excess of 2000 contacts were listed. This included paying members and general community supporters. In the initial phase, the survey was conducted via phone, to then be distributed via email, posted or faxed out. The survey was also set up on Survey Monkey, a web-based survey tool, where respondents' could log in with a provided password and complete the questionnaire online. In addition to the Farmsafe WA Alliance database, surveys were distributed through Alliance Member networks which increased the total number of distributed questionnaires. To promote the survey and increase the response rate further, three sponsors generously provided prizes which gave all survey participants the opportunity to win by completing the questionnaire. The sponsors in question were Wanneroo Great Wall, Mac 1 Motorcycles and Good Earth Hotel Perth and have been acknowledged accordingly.

In total 312 completed questionnaires were received and analysed using Survey Monkey.

The majority of respondents were owners or operators of the farm and either held a small landholding or operated a family farm, where the most common farming practice was mixed farming.

Many respondents stated safety practices were followed and implemented on their properties. Child safety, safe handling of machinery and equipment, livestock handling, training of staff and family members, chemical safety and the use of personal protective equipment were practiced 'always' or 'most of the time'. Although these answers were self-reported without further validation, it suggests farmers are safety aware and do implement a range of safety practices on their farms. Unfortunately, stress and fatigue management did not indicate similar results, as many farmers specified they practice it only 'some of the time' or 'never'.

Cost and time were the two most highlighted issues which prevented farmers and farm workers adequately implement safety practices on their properties or whilst at work.

Furthermore, respondents to the survey indicated several areas they needed assistance with, namely chemical handling, workshop safety, appropriate signage, machinery safety and personal protective equipment use being the top five areas specified.

The survey also provided the respondents with an opportunity to share their near miss stories, or provide details regarding injuries they had sustained whilst undertaking farm work. Although many indicated they had only sustained minor injuries, some stories gave a good example of the risks and hazards connected to the farming industry and the severity of possible outcomes.

To gain a better understanding of where farmers in Western Australia go to access safety information, the survey allowed respondents to list their sources of information. Agricultural literature, either in printed form or online, was the most popular, whilst friends and neighbours was the second most popular way to acquire this data.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the farming community's knowledge and perception of Farmsafe WA, questions were included relating to prior knowledge of Farmsafe WA Alliance, membership status and previously used Farmsafe WA services. Just over half of the respondents knew of Farmsafe WA Alliance before conducting the survey, whilst 20% had no prior knowledge. These numbers were not reflected in the membership status of the respondents, as the majority were not Farmsafe WA Alliance members, nor had they used any services that Farmsafe WA Alliance provides. This indicates a need to further promote and lift the image of Farmsafe WA Alliance within the farming community.

Information of what services farmers would find most beneficial was collated and analysed. The largest proportion of respondents listed legal requirements as a high priority need, followed closely by First Aid Courses. This may indicate that although farmers are aware of their legal requirements, they might lack the knowledge on how to comply. Similarly, as injuries are more commonplace in the rural industry compared with other industry groups, the importance of First Aid was highlighted in the responses.

Recommendations for future directions indicated several different approaches. To strengthen the Farmsafe WA Alliance image in the farming community through increased presence in the rural print media, at field days and through workshops were consistent recommendations. To distinguish the organisation as an advisory service without the powers to penalise, was also highlighted.

Overall, information from this survey will allow Farmsafe WA Alliance to move forward and address safety issues indicated by farmers in the West Australian community, safety issues the farmers deem important and those they need assistance with. Although the results from the survey are not representative for the entire State, some aspects align with known data and should be used as an indication in the future direction for Farmsafe WA Alliance.

Discussion

The Safety Needs Survey was conducted not only to gain further knowledge on the safety practices that exist on WA farms and properties, but also to uncover the solutions, services and assistance the farming community require to adequately implement better safety procedures for the benefit of themselves, their family and employees.

Several interesting points were identified throughout the survey. Although many farmers do exercise safety practices in many different risk and hazard areas, stress and fatigue management lags behind at an alarming rate.

Although the findings from the survey were not statistically significant, it provides us with an indication of behaviours and attitudes on West Australian farms.

A majority of respondents were owners/operators of their farms and live on either a small family farm or on a small landholding. The numbers of small landholdings are increasing in WA (Department of Agriculture and Food 2011), where people without farming background are moving onto the land. With the increased number of new landholders, the increased need for support and information follows. This indicated that Farmsafe WA needs to continue to focus on small family operated businesses where external staff numbers may be limited or only seasonal. Furthermore, a majority of respondents were operating mixed farms which further increased the types of hazards experienced.

The answers provided were mainly positive, where farmers indicated many safety procedures were being followed. Unfortunately the numbers were not as strong in the aspects of managing stress and fatigue. As many farmers are under great pressure for various reasons, stress management is imperative and should receive adequate attention and support.

This also relates to the reasons hindering farmers from implementing safety procedures. Cost and time are previously known factors (Pollock 2010) which impede safe farm work. This suggests the need of continuing support from organisations such as Farmsafe WA Alliance to farmers both on an individual basis but also for the entire community. Difficulties breaking old habits were also listed highly. Therefore, by targeting younger farmers and reaching them whilst in Agricultural Colleges and other school settings, the safety message can be adapted earlier.

Although cost and time are inhibitors to implement some safety aspects, respondents indicated they were also in need of further support and information. The most common topic respondents asked assistance with was the legislative aspects and in particular chemical handling, workshop safety and signage. We should therefore assume this is an area that requires attention, as these groups may not have the financial backing and/or time to contract OH&S consultants to help implement these systems, or perhaps may have reservations in doing so. The variation of topics can also indicate there are many topics where products and legislative aspects changes rapidly and therefore causes a sense of insecurity for what is 'best practice'.

The agricultural industry has higher injury risks in comparison with other industry groups (Pollock 2010) and near miss stories provide a picture of perceived injuries amongst farmers. Many indicated the injuries were not major, or answered they had not been hurt themselves but someone in the family has sustained an injury. Although injuries were not listed as major, farmers have been seen as a hardy group and attitudes may therefore play a big role in categorising injuries as minor or non-significant. Providing farmers with an opportunity where they can share these stories without threats of consequence such as inspections or fines could be a way to acknowledge certain risks and learn from them.

As approximately 20% of the respondents had no prior knowledge of Farmsafe WA before conducting the survey, there is a need for Farmsafe WA to distinguish itself as an organisation which provides free confidential advice to the farming community and has no powers of prosecution. Through collaboration and partnership with WorkSafe WA, this distinction can be strengthened with a positive outcome for both parties and the whole community in general.

The farmers that have used Farmsafe WA services were generally satisfied with the quality and the services provided. The perception of Farmsafe WA as a regulatory government body still exists however, and therefore some statements were unheeded when this was apparent.

Through the survey, Farmsafe WA sought information on future directions for the organisation. Many emphasised the above point of distinguishing Farmsafe WA as an organisation without powers of prosecution and stress the role as an advisory service organisation by 'getting the word out there'.

Another direction for future development was to work in collaborations with schools, targeting in particular students at Primary, TAFE and Agricultural Colleges to further expand the safety messages within the younger generations.

In general, respondents were satisfied with the role Farmsafe WA plays in the community.

With this in mind, some caution must be taken when analysing the responses. The Hawthorn effect may skew answers, as respondent would reply with what they think is the 'right answer', especially if perceiving Farmsafe WA Alliance as a government organisation. Also, as the responses are all self-reported, no further validation has been done. Despite this, the information provided by farmers in WA through this survey shows a continuing need of support, especially with rapidly changing legislation and technology.

Recommendations

Valuable information has been collected from this survey and key points have been clearly identifiable. The following recommendations are made:

- **Target group.**

As identified in this survey the reach of Farmsafe WA includes a big proportion of farmers with smaller family farms and individuals living on small landholdings. As a great deal of legislation apply for the farming sector, it is imperative there is adequate support and information readily available and accessible. Farmsafe WA's role as an advisory service, serves as a vital link and future collaboration with these groups can ensure the up keeping of safety practices on farms.

- **Stress and fatigue management.**

Although farmers do follow safety procedures and have identified several safety practices already in place on their farms, stress and fatigue management was not listed as a high priority. All businesses in Australia are facing increased pressure from changing economic conditions, changing government requirements and effects of such things as globalisation and information technology. Farmers are under as much, if not more, pressure than corporate businesses. Pressures come from external sources such as weather/drought, government legislation and reduced finance from economic conditions that impact on commodity prices and interest rates. Farmers also have special circumstances in that they live where they work and therefore more isolated from services and social interaction. As these subjects are sensitive and difficult to address, collaborations with other groups could increase the reach of support for farmers in Western Australia.

- **Safety implementation and legislation**

Cost and time constraints were the two most highlighted issues which prevented farmers and farm workers to adequately implement safety practices on their properties. Safety procedures and checklists need to be made readily available and more user friendly, whilst still addressing the legislative requirements and best practice options. Therefore consultation with key stakeholders in developing new checklists or addressing existing resource material is vital. Legal requirements proved to be of most interest to participants (43%) and the request to implement this via on-line information /DVD was noted.

Through the collaborative effort of farmers, farmer support organisations and experts in OH&S legislation, checklists and audit tools which can assist farmers to adequately comply with legislative requirements can be improved.

- **Raising awareness.**

Farmsafe WA services and resources are appreciated by many, although there is still a large proportion of the farming community that has not heard of our organisation. Through this survey, many respondents quite clearly believed Farmsafe WA and Worksafe WA are aligned and Farmsafe WA holds the power to prosecute farmers. This misconception has been consistent over the past years and remains evident in the community during our recent visits throughout the rural sector.

It is in the interest for both Farmsafe WA and Worksafe WA that these perceptions are changed and this can be achieved with an increase in presence at Major Field Days/Expos, community

visits and other involvement, both directly in programs run by Farmsafe WA or through partnership with other organisations and farmer groups.

- **Sharing stories.**

Sharing stories between neighbours or friends is a common way of exchanging information in the bush. By accessing a forum for spreading near miss stories, farmers can share their stories and learn from other stories. Developing an online space for farmers to access at their convenience could be a way to capture this information. Farmsafe WA plans to investigate this option via the Farmsafe WA website.

- **Membership benefits.**

By increasing Farmsafe WA Members' base, the exchange of information and knowledge between farmers and communities can be increased. As the relationship between Farmsafe WA as an organisation and its members is reciprocal, further development of the member benefits are to be considered and work is currently in progress.

- **Community involvement.**

Research indicates that visitors to rural properties do suffer major injuries and fatalities. Extensive community involvement therefore with groups and organisations outside the immediate farming community would be beneficial in reducing these statistics and increasing the awareness of the risks and hazards that are associated with living and/or working on rural properties and farms.

Farmsafe WA Alliance's Future Direction.

The following recommendations were extracted from the survey results:

- Strengthen the image of Farmsafe WA and distinguish from Worksafe
- Provide Legal requirements through on-line information
- Get safety information out to schools to target the younger generation
- Work more with key stakeholders, farmers and farming organisations
- Promote more case studies, near miss stories

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