

Work at Height – Harvest Time

Work at height is inherently high risk, with hazards often increasing under time pressures such as during harvest. This document outlines key safety considerations for carrying out work at height activities safely.

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Introduction

Working at height is a regular activity undertaken on farms and continues to be one of the leading causes of fatal injuries and accidents in agriculture. It accounts for over a quarter of all accidents in the sector. Whilst exact non-fatal injury numbers are difficult to confirm, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates there are up to 10,000 unreported injuries in agriculture every year.



These accidents commonly result from falls through fragile roofs, the misuse or failure of ladders, falls from vehicles and machinery, and unprotected edges. Unsafe practices such as standing in telehandler buckets instead of using suitable work platforms, continue to present significant risk.

Contributing factors include a lack of training, poor hazard awareness, and a tendency to take shortcuts particularly when supervision is limited or during peak periods such as harvest. Time pressure, weather dependency, and operational urgency can all lead to compromised safety standards.

Risk Assessment and Safe Systems of Work

Risk Assessment

Work at height is a high-risk activity and, in many instances, unavoidable within the sector, therefore it is important that a suitable and sufficient risk assessment is conducted to enable the required activities to be carried out in the safest manner possible. This should include following a risk hierarchy when selecting control measures, starting by considering whether the task can be eliminated, then, where this is not possible, reducing the need to work at height, implementing suitable engineering controls, and finally relying on safe systems of work and personal protective equipment as a last line of defence.

Given that agricultural conditions can change rapidly, for example, weather or ground conditions, dynamic risk assessments should also be carried out by workers. Dynamic risk assessments are conducted in real time and should complement the original assessment with any findings and additional control measures communicated and recorded where appropriate.

It is important that the findings of the risk assessment are communicated to workers, casual workers and contractors.

Safe System of Work

A Safe System of Work (SSoW) is a formal, structured approach to carrying out tasks in a way that minimises risk. The SSoW should be informed by the risk assessment. For work at height activities a SSoW would typically include clear procedures, supervision requirements, training arrangements, the provision and appropriate selection and use of access equipment, use and management of personal protective equipment (PPE), and emergency arrangements.

The SSoW should be communicated effectively to all workers, regularly reviewed, and adapted to changing seasonal conditions or tasks to maintain safety and reduce ill health.

Training should be supported by appropriate records, including evidence of competence and refresher training where required. Communication methods should reflect the workforce, including the use of pictorial guidance or translation where necessary. The SSoW should be regularly reviewed and adapted to reflect changing tasks and seasonal risks.

Access Equipment

Selecting and using the correct access equipment when working at height is essential to prevent serious injury or fatal falls. Unless there is access to equipment such as hydraulic bale trailers or automated sheeting systems, tasks including sheeting silage clamps, accessing harvest rigs or potato graders, or securing loads, require equipment such as properly secured ladders, or mobile elevated work platforms (MEWPs), rather than improvised solutions.

If mobile platforms are being used, then these should have a certificate of thorough examination (6 monthly) and operators should be suitably trained. Where ladders are used, these should be inspected, tagged and workers provided with training on the correct use and details on how to conduct visual pre-use checks.

Additionally non-integrated equipment, for example telehandlers used in conjunction with baskets to lift personnel are often seen in use within the sector however these should only be used for exceptional circumstances e.g. non-routine maintenance tasks for which it is impractical to provide or hire purpose-built access equipment.

Incorrect or poorly maintained access equipment can lead to instability, slips, or collapse, particularly in outdoor conditions where surfaces may be uneven or affected by adverse weather. Ensuring the right equipment is selected, regularly inspected, and used by trained individuals significantly reduces risks helping maintain a safe working environment.

Securing Loads

Activities such as securing bales and sheeting trailers carry significant risk, as they may require workers to access height. Unsafe practices, such as climbing onto loads or trailers, can increase the likelihood of falling or being struck by falling objects. However, on most farm premises, there is typically access to equipment such as steps, ladders, or mobile working platforms which should be used to support safer working at height.

Where this work is carried out in fields, or where equipment such as hydraulic bale trailers or automatic sheeting systems is not available, simple precautions can still reduce risk. Workers should be trained in how to throw and secure straps safely, and the area should be kept clear of other people to avoid the risk of injury.

Remember field workers often operate alone, so it is essential that additional safety controls are built into the safe system of work and reinforced through training. These should include avoiding unnecessary risks such as climbing onto bales or trailers, and ensuring workers keep mobile phones on their person at all times so they can quickly call for help in an emergency

There are practices using a telehandler and baskets intended to lift personnel, however as addressed in the above section, these combinations should only be used for emergency situations, not for routine operations.

Getting in and out of vehicles

Getting in and out of vehicles is a common cause of workers falling from a height resulting in workplace injuries. When rushing to complete tasks, there can be a temptation to jump down from vehicle cabs or steps. However, jumping from vehicles significantly increases the risk of injury, including strains, sprains, and fractures, particularly when landing on uneven or unstable ground. Key points to communicate with workers should include:

Maintain Three Points of Contact

- Always use three points of contact when mounting or dismounting tractors, telehandlers, or other machinery - two hands and one foot, or two feet and one hand.

Keep Access Points Clean and Safe

- Ensure steps and handholds are clean and free from mud, oil, or debris.
- Regularly check that steps and handholds are in good condition and not damaged.

Wear Appropriate Footwear

- Use footwear with good grip to minimise the risk of slipping, especially in wet, icy or muddy conditions.

Follow Safe Parking Practices

- Park vehicles on level and stable ground whenever possible.
- Ensure the vehicle is fully stationary and that the brakes are applied before exiting - remember Safe Stop!
 - Handbrake: Engage it fully to prevent the vehicle from rolling.
 - Neutral: Place all gears and operational controls in neutral.
 - Engine: Switch off the engine completely.
 - Key: Remove the ignition key to prevent unauthorized or accidental startup
- Never jump from vehicles. Taking a few extra seconds to exit safely can prevent serious injury.

It is good practice to carry out toolbox talks at regular intervals to remind drivers of the expected safe working practices.

Getting on and off harvesting and grading machinery

As part of harvest operations there is a range of machinery used which includes harvest rigs which can be towed or self-propelled and grading equipment such as potato graders. It is important that workers are provided with correct instruction on how to get on and off these safely.

Maintain Three Points of Contact

- Always use the designated steps and handholds.
- Always use three points of contact when mounting or dismounting tractors, telehandlers, or other machinery - two hands and one foot, or two feet and one hand.

Keep Access Points Clean and Safe

- Ensure steps, platforms and handholds are clean and free from mud, oil, or debris.
- Regularly check that they are in good condition and not damaged.

Wear Appropriate Footwear

- Use footwear with good grip to minimise the risk of slipping, especially in wet or muddy conditions.

Follow Safe Parking Practices

- Exit / access harvest rigs etc. on level and stable ground whenever possible.
- Ensure the vehicle is fully stationary and that the brakes are applied before exiting - remember Safe Stop!
- Next access or exit rigs when they are moving - even at creep speed.

It is good practice to carry out toolbox talks to remind drivers to adopt safe working practices.

Silage Clamps

Adopting a safe system of work when working at height on silage clamps is critical to prevent fatal falls and injuries from vehicle rollovers.

The safe system should include precautions such as:

- **Edge Protection:** Installing robust edge protection, (the top rail should be at least 1100mm above the wall height, with an intermediate rail roughly halfway up), not only does this serve as edge protection but also as a visual guide for drivers.
- **Earth Clamps:** Earth-walled clamps should have sloped sides/ends (less than 45 degrees) to prevent collapses and allow safe access.
- **Vehicle Safety on the Clamp:** Use only tractors or loading shovels fitted with an approved safety cab or Rollover Protective Structure (ROPS).
- **Packing Safety:** When rolling, work steadily and avoid driving too close to the edge of the clamp. Avoid sharp, sudden movements that could cause the edge to collapse.
- **Visibility:** Ensure the driver can clearly see the edge of the wall. Use high-visibility paint or markers on walls if necessary.
- **Overturning Risk:** If the tractor feels unstable, stop and reverse away from the edge.

- **Overfill:** Never fill clamps above the top of the wall; this renders safety rails useless and increases the risk of machinery overturning.
- **Safe Access Points:** Only use designated ladders or safe platforms to reach the top. Do not climb up walls.
- **Safe Sheeting and Covering:** Maintain a distance of at least 1 meter from the edge when laying plastic or removing tires.
- **Tools:** Use hooks, rakes, or long-handled tools to pull tires, gravel bags or plastic into place.

It is important that safe systems of work are communicated to workers, including causal workers and contractors, and verification is obtained to confirm their understanding.

Grain silos

When considering the need to access grain silos, this activity should be subject to a SSoW. Silos generally have fixed ladders however it is important to ensure that these are subject to regular inspections and that these are recorded. In addition, the ladders should be blanked off and secured when unattended to prevent unauthorised use.

Pre harvest inspections may require further examination of the silo and the use of suitable access equipment such as mobile elevated work platforms (MEWPs), or properly secured scaffolding may be required. In addition, fall arrest systems, such as harnesses and lifelines, should be used where there is a risk of falling. Remember that fall arrest systems must be subject to thorough examination at six monthly intervals and before each use.

Summary

Harvest periods are often high-pressure times, increasing the likelihood of accidents as tasks must be completed within tight timeframes. Thorough pre-harvest planning is therefore essential, as it enables potential risks to be identified in advance and appropriate control measures to be put in place. This proactive approach helps ensure that operations are carried out safely and efficiently.

Checklist

A generic Work at Height Checklist is presented in Appendix 1 which can be tailored to your own organisation.

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For more information please visit: [Aviva Risk Management Solutions – Specialist Partners](#)

Sources and Useful Links

- HSE Farmwise **
- HSE Website **

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Additional Information

Relevant Loss Prevention Standards include:

- [Induction Training](#)
- [Lone Working](#)
- [Dynamic Risk Assessments](#)
- [Working at Height](#)
- [Strengthening Claim Defensibility Through Effective Workplace Risk Assessment](#)

To find out more, please visit [Aviva Risk Management Solutions](#) or speak to one of our advisors.

Email us at [**riskadvice@aviva.com**](mailto:riskadvice@aviva.com) or call **0345 366 6666**.*

*The cost of calls to 03 prefixed numbers are charged at national call rates (charges may vary dependent on your network provider) and are usually included in inclusive minute plans from landlines and mobiles. For our joint protection telephone calls may be recorded and/or monitored.

Appendix 1 – Work at Height Checklist

Location	
Date	
Completed by (name and signature)	

	Work at Height - Harvest Time	Y/N	Comments
1.	Have all work at height activities been identified and a risk assessment conducted? Do the control measures identified in the risk assessments follow the concept of the risk control hierarchy?		
2.	Are workers aware of what is a dynamic risk assessment and to feed back where particular action has been taken?		
3.	Has a safe system of work been developed for work at height activities? Have workers received training on the safe system of work?		
4.	Is there a training programme in place to ensure that workers are suitably trained to carry out work at height activities? Are suitable records of training and comprehension maintained?		
5.	Where required has suitable access equipment been identified?		
6.	Is access equipment e.g. ladders / MEWPS subject to pre-use inspection? Are these inspections recorded?		
7.	If using MEWPS or similar, have checks been made to ensure they have a current certificate of thorough examination?		
8.	If using MEWPS or similar types equipment, are operators suitably trained?		
9.	Where workers are carrying out pre-use inspections, have they been suitably trained and know what to look for?		
10.	Is there a means to record pre-use inspections?		

	Work at Height - Harvest Time	Y/N	Comments
11.	Have workers received training in the correct securing of loads?		
12.	Where fall arrest systems are used are these subject to thorough examination and pre-use inspections? Are these recorded?		
13.	Have activities where lone working takes place been identified and suitable measures implemented?		

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