



New data on agriculture fatalities highlights need for culture of safety

Byline: Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

A new report is helping highlight the need to embrace a culture of safety in agriculture.

The Canadian Agricultural Injury Reporting (CAIR) released its latest report with data on agriculture-related fatalities between 1990 and 2020, with particular focus on 2011-2020. CAIR is a national surveillance program funded by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association and coordinated by the Injury Prevention Centre at the University of Alberta.

According to the latest findings of CAIR, from 1990 to 2020, there were 2,814 agriculture-related fatalities in Canada, an average of 91 deaths each year. However, when looking at figures between 2006 and 2020, the average number of fatalities drops to 70 per year. That decrease offers a glimmer of good news for the industry, but the report makes it clear that agriculture still has a long way to go when it comes to safety.

Of particular concern, says Dr. Don Voaklander, director of the Injury Prevention Centre, is the fatality rate for the 0-14 age group. As the CAIR report notes, one of the unique aspects of agriculture is that farms and ranches are not just worksites but also places where people live. As a result, while other industries see victims of occupational injuries almost exclusively in the 18 to 65 age range, children account for a significant number of injuries in agriculture.

“It’s still distressing that the child fatality rate has not changed one iota in the 30 years of CAIR reports. It’s just flatline for fatality rates with kids and that’s the most disturbing part of the report,” stresses Voaklander, adding that the primary mechanisms of injury for children on the farm are drownings and machine runovers.

“It’s always more distressing when we haven’t changed behaviour around kids. While the mechanisms [of injury] have changed over the years, the rate of fatalities for kids hasn’t.”



However, Voaklander notes that there have been “significant gains” with older farmers. Though fatality rates are still the highest among older farmers, there has been a steady decline in fatalities for the 60 and over age group, with a statistically significant decrease of 1.8% each year from 1990 to 2020. Chief among the reasons for the decline, explains Voaklander, is the modernization of farm equipment.

“In anecdotal information, the older farmers typically, when working on the farm, take out the older equipment because they’re familiar with it. But a lot of that older equipment is coming out of service now, which has made a significant difference. The use of more modern equipment has certainly had an impact,” Voaklander says.

While the overall decrease in fatality rates is promising, it comes with a catch – the number of fatalities has declined because the number of farmers in Canada has dropped significantly. According to Census of Agriculture data, there was a 51% decrease in the Canadian farm population from 1990 to 2020, a difference of 571,033 fewer people on farms.

“The number of fatalities has decreased but that correlates with the number of farmers actively farming,” explains Voaklander.

Despite some positive gains in decreasing agriculture-related fatalities, Voaklander stresses that the industry remains one of the most hazardous. In fact, the CAIR report notes that agriculture ranks as the fourth most hazardous industry in Canada regarding rates of fatal injuries, but is the most dangerous occupation “in terms of absolute numbers of fatalities.” A primary reason for that, says Voaklander, is because of a culture of risk that is inherent across agriculture.

“Agriculture, as an industry, hasn’t adopted a culture of safety,” Voaklander says. “One of the reasons the farming community is so unique is that it’s all about a culture of risk. ‘What insurance am I going to take out? What commodity am I going to produce? Is the weather going to be helpful to me this year?’ Risk is an accepted part of the culture in agriculture and that’s really hard to change.”



Part of adopting a culture of safety is being aware of the hazards that exist across all farm work. While farmers and farm workers are well aware of the risks associated with rollovers and runovers – which remain the top two mechanisms of injury for agriculture-related fatalities – Voaklander says there are other hazards that many aren't as aware of, such as drownings.

“Farms are full of dugouts and manure pits and stock tanks, and these are all drowning hazards, especially for kids on the farm,” explains Voaklander.

“It comes down to that safety needs to be part of the everyday. Whenever something needs to be done, the thought process should be ‘What’s the safest way I should do this?’”

And that need to embrace farm safety as part of the everyday is tied to the overarching purpose of the CAIR data, which Voaklander says is intended to help “back up the position that farm safety is important.”

“That’s the importance of maintaining these reports, that it keeps the data front and centre. It underscores the issue and proves the importance of farm safety and that more needs to be done.”

The latest CAIR report can be found at www.casa-acsa.ca/en/cair/reports.

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.

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Image:

Don Voaklander

Caption: Dr. Don Voaklander is director of the Injury Prevention Centre at the University of Alberta, which coordinates the Canadian Agricultural Injury Reporting national surveillance program. (Photo supplied by Dr. Don Voaklander)