



SAFETY ALERT

Mobile Plant (Tractors) Injury to Older Farmers

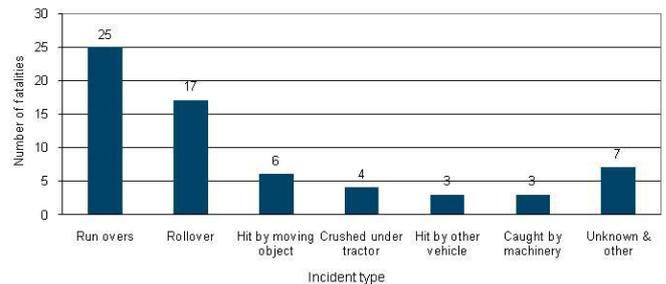
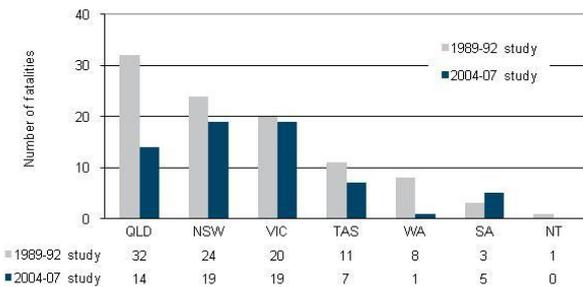
As the labour force ages (along with the population), industries which have higher proportions of mature age workers are the most likely to be affected by their loss. For example, in 2004–05, half of all people working in the Agriculture, fishing and forestry industry were aged 45–74 years. This is consistent with the trend for fewer young people to enter farming as a vocation and with farmers often working beyond the age of 65 years (ABS 2003). The Agriculture, forestry & fishing industry employed 336 000 people in 2008–09, representing 3% of the Australian workforce.

A Study by Safe Work Australia in 1989–92 reported an increase in the number of deaths as age increased. This pattern was not so obvious a subsequent study in the 2004–07. Workers in the 65 years or over age group still account for the highest number of deaths and the actual number of deaths has not changed between the two studies with 25 deaths recorded in the 1989–92 study and 26 deaths recorded in the 2004–07 study.

While this oldest group accounted for 25% of all tractor-related deaths in 1989–92, it accounted for 40% in 2004–07. The latest study shows that only 16 of the deaths (25%) occurred to workers aged less than 45 years. This is less than half the number in the previous study (37 deaths – 36%).

Figure 1: Worker fatalities due to tractors: number by state of death

Figure 2: Incident type



The graph in figure 1 clearly demonstrate that tractor (mobile plant) fatality rates have dropped, mainly because of the introduction of the Roll Over Protective Structures (ROPS) legislation. However other causers of fatality and serious injury have remained the same or increased.

Of the 25 run over deaths that were identified in 2004–07, 9 occurred in Victoria, 5 in New South Wales, 4 each in Queensland and Tasmania, 2 in South Australia and 1 in Western Australia. More than half (13 of the 25 deaths) of the workers killed were aged 65 years or over. These incidents happened in a number of ways:

- ❑ 6 workers attempted to start their tractor whilst standing outside of the tractor between the front and rear wheels. In all these cases the tractor had been left in gear which meant once the tractor started, it moved and dragged the worker under a wheel. In 2 of these cases, the tractor was being jump-started and in 1 a screwdriver was being used. This indicates a poor state of maintenance. The previous study also found 6 deaths that occurred in similar circumstances.

- ❑ 4 workers had parked the tractor but had not engaged the brake sufficiently and the tractor moved once the worker had stepped off. In 2 of the cases, the worker had tried to re-enter the vehicle to stop it moving further. In the other 2 cases, the tractor crushed the worker between the tractor and a fixed object (tree, fence). All 4 of these workers were aged 65 years and over.
- ❑ 7 workers had temporarily alighted to undertake an activity around the vehicle but did not apply the brake adequately. In all 7 cases a run over occurred due to the changing weight as the driver alighted allowing the tractor to move. In 4 of these incidents farmers were undertaking activities involving the picking up or moving of hay bales while 3 involved the linking of attachments.
- ❑ 2 workers were thrown from their tractors while riding over uneven terrain and were then run over by the tractor.
- ❑ 2 deaths involved a passenger on a trailer being towed by a tractor: 1 worker was killed after alighting from the trailer and the tractor was reversed over him; the other worker was killed when the trailer became separated from the tractor while going up a steep incline; the worker was thrown or jumped from the trailer and then run over by it.

In 8 of the 25 cases discussed, it was clear that the worker was standing between the tyres when the tractor started moving. In most cases this resulted in the worker being dragged under the rear tyres. There were 2 cases where the worker was standing in front of the tractor when it moved and 7 where the worker was standing behind the tractor when it rolled backwards over them. In the remaining cases there was not sufficient information to determine the direction of the tractor at the time of the incident.

The risk of falling and being injured from a fall increases as people age. Preventing falls in older people is important because falls often result in serious injury, including admission to hospital or fatality. A fall is also the most common reason for admission to residential aged care so avoiding falls can help you to remain active and independent on the farm.

Information on preventing falls and injury to older farmers can be obtained by going to http://www.aghealth.org.au/tinymce_fm/uploaded/falls_resource.pdf or Workplace Health and Safety Queensland's website at <http://www.deir.qld.gov.au/workplace/subjects/rural/index.htm>

Further information on this topic or any other work health and safety issue can be obtained by contacting Farmsafe Queensland on 1300 737 640 or emailing Jamie Cupples on jcupples@farmsafe.com.au

Reference: Safe Work Australia - Fatalities due to working with tractors, Australia 2003–04 to 2006–07.