

Many farm fatalities have a common link — distraction.

Occupational Hazards

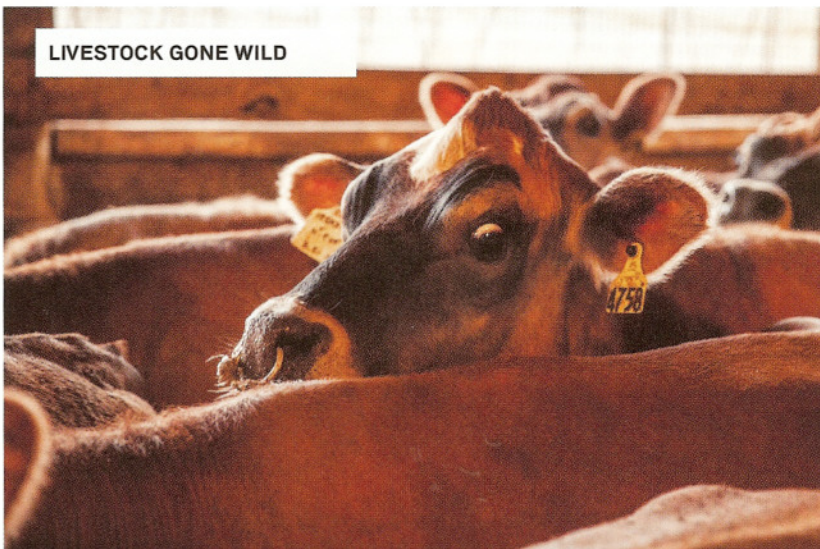
Other factors unique to farm work are equally hazardous. Farmers work outside, for instance, and in warmer regions, heatstroke is a common cause of fatalities. Farmers also work closely with large animals—ornery bulls claim a few lives each year. Pesticides and other chemicals can prove lethal, both from instant mishaps and prolonged exposure. Taller farm equipment can run into power lines. You could even make a case that suicide is a farm danger, especially in countries like India, where it's become an epidemic. A Clay County pig farmer recently killed himself with a .40-caliber gun, leaving a note that claimed farm finances were to blame. Dr. David Robison, Clay County medical examiner, says this farmer wasn't the first.

For many migrant farm workers, language barriers can also be fatal. R. Lewis Van Blois, a California personal injury lawyer, has represented the estates of many deceased or severely injured ag workers. He says older equipment often only has English instructions, and migrant farm workers have historically been given very little safety training. "These are low-income earners, many not legal, afraid to speak up," he says. "Nobody's really advocating for their safety."

Many farm fatalities also have a common link—distraction. Just like on the highway, farm accidents only take a momentary lapse in concentration. "It's one thing when you've had your full eight hours of sleep," says Robison. "But when you've been up all night delivering cows, or you're in the field 16 hours during harvest season, let's just say you're not at peak performance."

Time constraints can lead to shortcuts as well. Smith, who now walks with a pronounced limp, says he should have taken more precautions. Bolts were loose, and he didn't have the right tool on hand. A huge winter storm was on its way, and he was trying to finish

LIVESTOCK GONE WILD



Before tractors, horses were the most dangerous pieces of farm equipment. Now, livestock accidents usually involve bulls goring their owners, or pigs, cows or other animals trampling farmers.

TRACTOR TRAUMA



Tractors are by far the biggest cause of U.S. farm injuries and deaths. Rollover technology has made current machines safer, but many farmers use older models lacking safety features.

the project in a hurry. "There's not a farmer out there that won't take a shortcut from time to time," says Smith.

The Way Forward

In the last few decades, safety has become more of a priority. Particularly risky equipment—like the "corn picker," which once claimed many a farmer's thumb in Clay County—has been phased out. Cell phones enable

farmers to reach emergency personnel for quicker rescue, and handling certain pesticides now requires certification. More grain bins are being equipped with harnesses—a mandatory feature on farms with 10 or more workers. Tractors, combines and other farm machinery now come with a "dead-man switch," which means the engine shuts down if no one is manning the equipment.