

Financial costs implicated in farmers' risk taking

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Credit: University of Aberdeen

Farmers are risking personal safety due to financial pressures according to new research from the University of Aberdeen.

The research, published in the Journal of Agromedicine, looked at the different types of [risk](#) that farmers deal with on a daily basis in an attempt to understand what drives [risk taking](#) and how it can be improved.

Around 3 fatal farm-worker accidents are reported each month in the UK alone, a statistic that prompted Industrial Psychology researcher Dr. Amy Irwin to investigate farm [safety](#) and how farmers approach risk.

"Farmers are a unique group of workers in that they often grow up, and learn how to manage tasks, on a farm. Farming is a high risk occupation that involves long hours, weather dependent tasks, a lot of lone working and management of multiple competing demands".

"Fatal injuries in agriculture are steady at a rate of around 2 or 3 per month, a figure that hasn't dropped even with the changes in health and safety culture over the last 25 years.

"So farmers have a reputation for being risk takers—there is an assumption that they engage in dangerous behaviours and people aren't sure why. I wanted to see whether one of the factors that might influence their behaviour is the characteristics of the risk itself. "

Dr. Irwin recruited 148 farmers from across the UK to her study who were presented with different types of risky scenario and asked to indicate whether they would work on despite the risk. Examples included scenarios involving faulty machinery, human factors – such as feeling tired and environmental hazards such as ditch erosion.

The results showed that farmers were neither, generally risk taking or risk averse but that they reacted differently according to the characteristics of the risk. What was interesting was the farmers' explanations of why they would, or would not, take certain risks. For example, in the faulty equipment scenario such as an unexplained leak – they would generally not go ahead, not because of reasons related to personal safety, but instead due to the risk of damaging expensive equipment. In comparison, in the scenario depicting a farmer suffering from stress, most of the participants would go ahead, reporting that

stress was never a reason to stop work, but that you just have to get on with things. This suggests farmers do not consider stress a safety risk. In many scenarios reasons for going ahead included work pressure – such as the need to complete certain tasks during dry weather, or the fact that in many cases if the farmer in question didn't do the task, there was no-one else to take over (lone working).

Dr. Irwin explains: "These results are interesting as they indicate that farmers are not assessing each risk purely from a safety perspective – they are also assessing it in terms of financial gains or losses, both machinery repair and issues linked to work pressure".

"Going forward, it is important to consider the different risks that a farmer has to deal with and that the messaging for these risks might need to be individualised. Specifically – if you messaged a type of risk in terms of financial ramifications – the farmer might be more likely to pay attention."

NFU Scotland President Andrew McCornick said: "Unfortunately for those who work in the industry farming is a dangerous occupation. Whether it is working with unpredictable livestock or high powered machinery, farmers need to be constantly on the alert to different dangers.

"So many accidents that happen on farms occur because a [farmer](#) is rushing, not wanting to waste money, or is just not putting their safety and wellbeing as a priority.

"My advice to farmers when it comes to safety would be to stop, take a breath, and think about what the safest way to do a job is. It may not always be the quickest or the cheapest, but in the long run it will be the best."

More information: Amy Irwin et al. Investigation of UK Farmer Go/No-Go Decisions in Response to Tractor-Based Risk Scenarios, *Journal of Agromedicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/1059924X.2017.1423000](https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2017.1423000)

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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