



29 September 2022

Agricultural Industry Inquiry  
WorkSafe  
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## **RE Agricultural Industry Inquiry**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Pastoralists and Graziers Association of WA (PGA) is a non-profit industry organisation established in 1907, which represents primary producers in both the pastoral and agricultural regions of Western Australia.

Current membership numbers equate to 84% of all pastoral leases, excluding Indigenous and conservation leases, and 21% of broadacre producers in the agricultural regions of Western Australia. This includes grain, livestock and mixed enterprises.

As an organisation which consists solely of primary producers from both the pastoral and agricultural regions, the PGA recognises the importance of on farm safety, and the seriousness of work-related deaths and serious injuries within the agricultural and pastoral industries.

We are pleased to provide this brief submission to the Agricultural Industry Inquiry.

### **BACKGROUND**

On 22 June 2022 WorkSafe Commissioner Darren Kavanagh announced an Inquiry under the provisions of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2020* into the agricultural industry, following the 12<sup>th</sup> work-related death in 12 months in the sector.

The Inquiry will result in a report that reflects the findings and makes recommendations on matters that affect safety performance in the industry and have influenced the increase in fatal accidents.

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## SUMMARY

The most valuable asset to any farm or pastoral station is its workforce. Whether it consists of migrant workers, employees, family, or a combination of all of the above, the health and safety of workers is of foremost concern for all professional farmers and pastoralists. It is in their self-interest, both emotionally and financially, to protect their own health and safety as well as that of their employees.

Like mining and construction, agriculture is one of the highest risk occupations in Western Australia. However, on-farm safety is unique and different from mining and construction in many ways. In no other industry do operators typically live and raise their families in the same place where they work. And in many instances, their employees are their family, friends and neighbours. Any injury or death comes with a heavy emotional and psychological toll for those families and communities.

Agriculture is important and rewarding but is often hard work with a high physical demand, long hours and modest margins. The agricultural sector is also uniquely pressurized by the influences of market demand, the time pressure of seasonal operations, and the need to hire, train and retain workers on a seasonal basis.

Further, broadacre agricultural and pastoral production are conducted over land that is not flat, often exposed to extreme weather events, bushfires, washed out roads and floods, and involves dealing with unpredictable livestock and feral animals.

In addition, these farming and pastoral operations require the use of a wide range of potentially hazardous chemicals and materials and a wide variety of machinery.

Unlike other professions, farmers and pastoralists have a vast range of responsibilities and heavy workloads. Their individual management styles, including a culture of *prioritize the workload and get the job done*, family dynamics and the stressors of operating the farm can push safety thoughts to the sidelines.

As chronic labour shortages continue to plague the agricultural sector, the issue of worker fatigue continues to put extra strain on producers, often contributing to poor decision making. Tiredness and a cultural mentality that 'you got to get it done' is often a precursor to many accidents, especially during harvest or mustering.

The vast majority of farmers and pastoralists are diligent in developing and implementing safety procedures for as many potential threats to worker health and safety as possible. However, it is important that such safety procedures be developed and implemented as a partnership and shared responsibility of both employer and employee, as most modern farming and pastoral operations are run by a very small number of workers who frequently work in isolation due to the sheer physical scale of modern farms and pastoral properties.

Industries such as mining and construction are often held up as the benchmark for what workplace safety systems should be. Yet unlike most farming and pastoral operations, these industries, which are dominated by multi-national corporations, have very large and generally predictable profit margins which allow them to afford sophisticated and expensive safety systems, including the ability to employ specialized health and safety staff to develop and maintain their safety systems.

In contrast, most farming and pastoral operations experience smaller and often infrequent profit margins, due to the unpredictable nature of all the variables previously referred to that agricultural operations are exposed to. This inherently translates to a lesser capacity to afford the development of sophisticated health and safety systems, or the employment of dedicated health and safety professionals. In addition, the use of casual, seasonal and migrant workers, who need to be productive sooner rather than later, provides further complications in ensuring the same compliance levels as in the mining or construction sectors.

These differences in no way excuse farmers and pastoralists from fulfilling their duty and responsibility to protect the safety of all workers. However, it is important to note that it is not practicable to expect or impose the same level of compliance and enforcement as other industries.

Aggressively pursuing and trying to catch farmers and pastoralists on compliance technicalities will in no way initiate any cultural change. Neither will imposing the same "big stick" investigative approach that is used in the mining and construction industries.

Legislation and regulation have never proven to be the answer for improving worker safety in the agricultural industry. The solution must come from within the industry itself. Reducing work-related deaths and serious injuries within the agricultural and pastoral industries depends on creating a culture of safety that is built collaboratively by everyone involved in the industry.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Independent Inquirer to discuss this matter in further detail.

Yours faithfully



**Tony Seabrook**  
PGA President