

## Identifying hazards and implementing control

# Safety first – you rarely

We spoke to two safety professionals for some tips on how to get to grips with health and safety on UK dairy units and we also find out why slurry handling practices and storage facilities should be firmly at the top of every producers 'must check' list.

text **Rachael Porter**

**W**e've all cut corners – when we're tired, short staffed or simply distracted – but that can be a risky business on a dairy unit. There are hazards in any work place and probably considerably more than average on a typical dairy unit.

Key to avoiding accidents and injuries and, in the very worst case, fatalities is identifying these hazards, sometimes by means of a formal risk assessment, and putting control measures in place to make them as safe as is reasonable possible.

"It's the day-to-day jobs that can sometime catch people out, particularly if they're rushing or not concentrating," says Alastair Mitchell, one of the Health and Safety Executive's leading agricultural inspectors.

"In my experience, dairy producers are busy people, working long hours and frequently working alone. In these situations they may not spot the dangers, particularly where livestock is concerned. Handling stock becomes 'familiar and routine' and producers may become a bit relaxed or over confident or try to cut corners. And that's when things can go wrong.

"The HSE is aware of many cattle-related injuries and fatalities where producers have worked with livestock without adequate and suitable handling facilities," adds Mr Mitchell.

## **COSHH assessments**

Other routine tasks, such as handling animal medicines and dairy chemicals, also carry a degree of risk. These may not be life threatening, but they can be life changing. A serious back or eye injury can put even the most determined

and dedicated producer out of action. "So it's important that producers carry out a COSHH assessment. This stands for the control of substances hazardous to health," explains Dairy Management System's adviser Oliver Dale. His company carries out these and other health and safety audits and assessments on dairy units across the UK.

"And this is a typical area where many dairy units are lacking in terms of health and safety. Yet it can be quite a straight forward area to tackle – costing a little

time rather than money – and it is a great way to make a start if you just don't know where to begin as far as getting your unit up to scratch is concerned.

"Often it's just a case of making sure that everyone on farm knows how to store and handle the substances correctly and safely, wearing personal protective equipment if necessary.

"Conducting staff meetings is particularly effective. It helps to bring staff into the process and is also a means of providing basic health-and-safety training and increasing awareness. They also help to remove any fear of the subject and serve to motivate staff.

"It's really not rocket science and I know that many health and safety consultants would agree that an awful lot of it is common sense. I'd say that some issues, particularly with regard to the COSHH assessment, can be resolved with good housekeeping and organisation.



measures are key to reducing accident risk

# get a second chance

“Some farms can be a bit scruffy and tidying up can, actually, make them safer and also make work routines easier. Don’t leave chemical drums, for example, where they could get hit by a vehicle, and set up a system that makes it simple and easy to decant chemicals. If it’s easier then it should also be safer,” says Mr Mitchell.

## Daunting prospect

Other typical problem areas on dairy units include slurry storage and handling, livestock handling, lone working and working at heights.

“It can be quite daunting – there is often a lot to do. So the key is to prioritise. Look at what needs to be done urgently and what can be done relatively easily. Once they’ve made a start, our clients feel more confident about beginning to tackle everything else,” adds Mr Dale. Something that should be seen as urgent – and something of a concern on many

units according to Mr Mitchell – is the safe storage and handling of slurry and, more specifically, adequate slurry lagoon fencing. “All too often I see lagoons with fencing that’s too low, too easy to climb, poorly maintained, or there’s just no fencing at all. Yet slurry is one of the most dangerous substances on a dairy unit,” he says. “It offers no support or buoyancy – if you fall into a lagoon or pit you will sink straight to the bottom. Some are as deep as three or four metres in the winter, when cows are being housed.”

People unfamiliar with the dangers of slurry, such as children, may think that the surface of the lagoon looks fairly solid. “This is particularly the case when the crust on the top has been there long enough for vegetation to become established,” adds Mr Mitchell.

Fencing should be at least 1.3 metres high and child-proof, which means that there are no hand or foot holds to

facilitate climbing and it’s also secured at the bottom. “There should also be two strands of barbed wire along the top, as an added deterrent. Gates also need to meet these specifications and they need to be locked.”

## Toxic gases

Slurry tanks and stores are also dangerous and covers should be secure and locked. Slurry gases, which build up in these stores, are also a serious hazard and one that has, on occasion, been underestimated, with tragic consequences.

In September 2012, Nevin Spence, his brother Graham and father Noel all died at their farm near Hillsborough in Northern Ireland after entering a slurry store to rescue the family dog. The men died after being overcome by slurry fumes, including hydrogen sulphide. This has the same lethal effects as hydrogen cyanide.

The tragedy was triggered when a collie dog fell into the tank, which was situated below a cattle shed and contained less than four feet of slurry. Graham Spence went to the pet’s aid but, as he exited the tank, he was overcome and slumped back into the pit.

Nevin went to his brother’s aid but was also overcome by fumes. And their father, Noel, followed them into the pit and managed to find Graham. But as he carried his son back up the ladder, the 58-year-old also succumbed to the gases. His daughter Emma – Nevin and Graham’s sister – twice tried to rescue the men. She was also overcome but survived.

“This tragic case highlights the need for a thorough risk assessment when dealing with slurry” says Mr Mitchell. “Anyone planning on emptying a pit or tank, or entering a confined space such as a slurry store, should follow HSE guidelines to help minimise the risks. “With something like slurry, you rarely get a second chance.” |

*Risky job: producers should ensure that the area is well ventilated when emptying slurry pits and tanks*

➔ There’s more information and guidance about slurry storage on the HSE website at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture>