

Careful planning and communication are key to reducing risk

Safer silage making

It's one of the busiest times of the year and one of the most risky in terms of health and safety. So we spoke to one of the UK's leading safety professionals about minimising the risk of injury – or worse – during the silage-making season.

text **Rachael Porter**

Time is money and never more so than during silage making for many producers. With an eye on the weather – and the clock – it's all hands on deck to get grass cut, tedded, picked up, and clamped or wrapped as quickly as possible.

Top-quality forage is key. But some

producers and contractors have paid the ultimate price for all this rushing around. Unguarded PTO shafts can cause, at best, life changing injuries and, at worst, death. And tipping trailers under overhead power cables has also proved fatal on some units.

So what steps can you take, as a producer,

to make sure that you or one of your colleagues doesn't become another statistic?

"Agreeing a safe system of work with your contractor, before any work begins, is vital," says Alastair Mitchell, one of the Health and Safety Executive's agricultural inspectors.

"Remember, some contractors will be working on farms for the first time and won't be familiar with the layout or the land. So make time to sit down with the contractor and discuss where the power lines are and agree a safe route in and out of the farm. Setting up a one-way system for traffic is one way of reducing risks from heavy machinery, as is making the farm yard a 'no-pedestrian zone' for the duration of the work. Children should most definitely be kept well out of the way," he adds.

Blind spots

"People being run over by tractors and trailers and telescopic handlers are all too common. There may be blind spots and operators can't always see exactly what's behind them. And, because it's an extremely busy time, people are very focused on the job in hand."

Starting with mowing – which some producers will do themselves and then use a contractor to pick up, cart and clamp – he says that it's essential that the power-take-off (PTO) shaft from the

PTO guard: make sure all equipment is well maintained and safe to use



Safe stacking: store bales in an area that's level and offers easy access for handling



mower to the tractor is properly guarded. “There are no excuses for this – we all know how devastating the consequences of getting caught in a rotating shaft can be. Yet we still see unguarded PTOs in use on farms and sadly we also still see horrific accidents that often result in a fatality,” says Mr Mitchell.

“This equipment may not have been used for some months, so it’s important to ensure that it’s well maintained and fit for use. Don’t take an ‘it’ll do’ approach, far better to adopt a ‘see it, sort it’ attitude. And don’t forget to practice ‘safe stop’ before intervening with a machine for any reason.” See pictogram and remember brakes on, controls into neutral, switch-off, and put the key in your pocket.

Tipping trouble

Tipping trailers to fill the clamp can also pose a risk if there are overhead power (OHP) cables on the farm. “Always try to avoid working near power lines where you can,” says Mr Mitchell. He stresses that, once again, producers must point out exactly where the OHP cables are on the farm – if there are any. “Assess the risks, agree a safe system of work with the contractor, and make sure that everyone knows about any possible hazards.”

Overhead power cables must stand at a minimum height of 5.2 metres above the ground, for an 11KV line. “But many self-propelled harvesters’ discharge chutes are more than six metres tall. That poses an immediate problem.” If you have any doubts about working near power lines then speak to your local distribution network operator. They can arrange for

an engineer to come out and measure the height of the lines. In some situations it may be possible to arrange for the power to be switched off or have the lines diverted.”

Mr Mitchell adds that it’s important that workers know that if their machine hits a power line, and they can’t move it away, they should stay in the cab and use their mobile to call for help.

“If they need to get out of the machine – perhaps if it catches fire – they should jump clear, making sure they don’t make contact with the machine and the ground at the same time. If they panic then they may not remember that there’s a safe way to dismount, so remind everyone of this if there are OHP cables on your unit.”

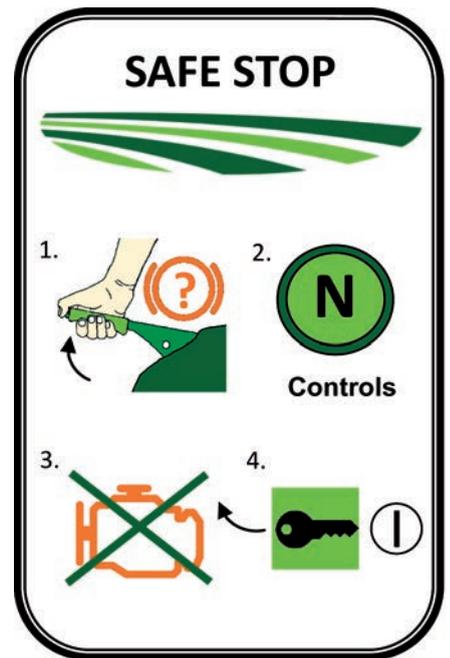
Sight rails, to indicate the edge of the silage clamp, are also important and should be fitted before rolling begins. “Rolling is a job for the experienced tractor driver – it requires skill. It’s not a job for a novice.”

Stack safely

For producers making silage bales, safe stacking and handling is something else to focus on. “Accidents involving all types of bales are quite common, but easily prevented with careful planning and the right equipment,” says Mr Mitchell.

“Handling attachments must be suitable for the job and well maintained. Stack bales on a level site that offers good access for machinery and plenty of space for turning. Avoiding areas with OHP lines is a must here too.”

Since 2000 there have been 19 recorded fatalities resulting from people being struck by bales. “They’re extremely



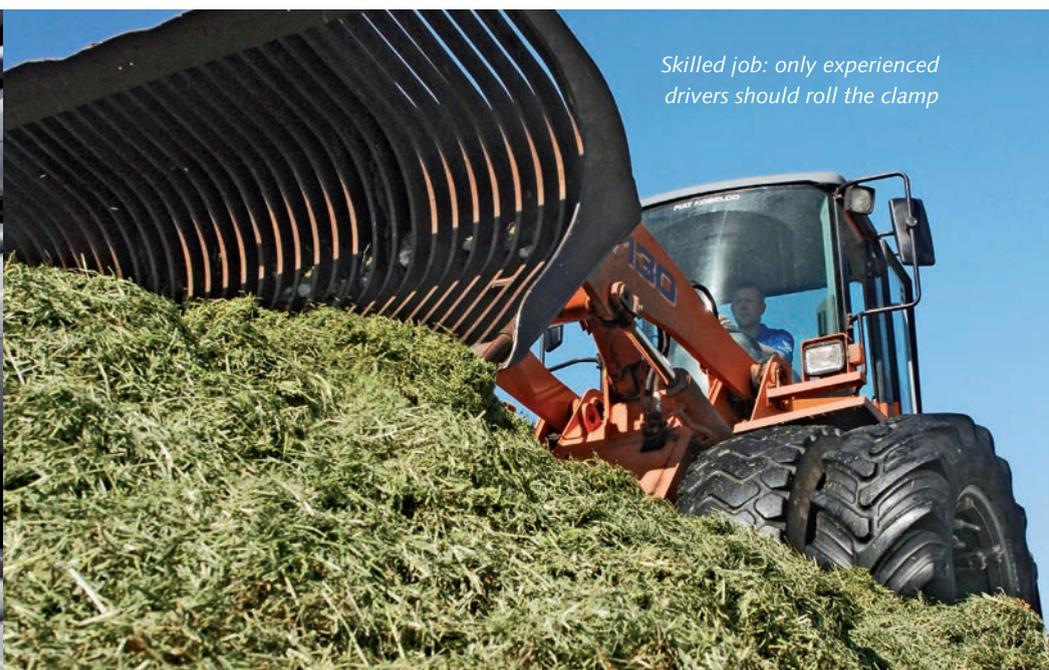
Always practice ‘safe stop’ before you intervene with a machine: 1. Apply brakes, 2. Controls neutral, 3. Switch off, 4. Key out

heavy – up to half a tonne – and should be moved with care.”

Again, he says, there’s a degree of complacency leading to many accidents. “And there’s a tight window to work in – particularly when making silage – so people may be tempted to cut corners when they’re under pressure.

“But it is important to make some time to plan any job carefully to minimise the risks. Follow HSE’s guidance to help make this a safe silage-making season.”

➔ For more information about these safety topics, visit the HSE website at <http://www.hse.gov.uk> and select ‘agriculture’



Skilled job: only experienced drivers should roll the clamp