Farm Safety & Fatigue Fatality File



Farmer shares battle for life, raising awareness of fatigue and burnout in rural jobs

Cambridge farmer Owen Gullery almost drowned in the effluent pond on his farm, turning his life upside down.

On the night of the accident in October 2011, Gullery had a cow that he knew would have problems calving, so he went to check on her late at night.

“We had a three-pond effluent system, and I knew she was in the paddock by the dry pond, but it was a ‘pea-soupy’ kind of night with fog everywhere. By the time I got to her, it was 11 o’clock. I drove the tractor up the side of the pond where I thought she was, went over the bank and, before I knew it, the cab was filling up with effluent.”

“I’d driven into the wrong pond because I was so tired.”

An ACC-funded study for Farmstrong, a rural well-being program for farmers and growers to help them “live well to farm well”, shows 58 percent of recently injured farmers linked their accidents to stress associated with farm work. A quarter of them said it was a major factor.

Exhaustion, lack of sleep, the stresses of farming, being isolated from friends and family, and being unable to take a break all add to the risks that a farmer or farm worker will have an accident, the research shows.

Gullery went into a panic as he fought for his life. “I couldn’t get anything to open. I ended up gasping for breath in the last couple hundred miles of cab space, managed to kick the back window open, grabbed the blade on the back of the tractor, and hauled myself out. It was pretty scary. I ended up sitting on the bank bawling my eyes out.”

That near-fatal accident has changed his approach to life and work. Now he’s alerting other farmers to the dangers of fatigue and burnout. “That accident was 100 percent my fault and avoidable. That’s why this stuff’s worth talking about.”

Gullery contracts 480 cows on a dairy farm near Cambridge. He’s been in the industry for 20 years and loves “the daily challenges of farming – good and bad”.

“I was your typical ‘I’m gonna take on the world’ guy, working full-on hours. I wanted to make as much money as I could and bank every cent so I could buy a farm. That drove me to work 200 to 300 days in a row without a break.”

“I only had one staff member when I needed two, but I was trying to save money. I was busy on all fronts. But I thought, ‘It’s my time. I’m in my prime. I’ll go as hard as I can’. I was working from 4 in the morning till 8 at night most days.”