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Safety Alert

Protecting Workers as Seasons Change

November brings changing conditions for Georgia's agricultural industry. Harvest demands, shorter days, cooler temperatures, and holiday responsibilities can create added pressure for workers on farms, in cotton gins, at nurseries, and throughout other agricultural operations.

This is a good time to review seasonal hazards and reinforce everyday safety practices. A few minutes spent discussing equipment safety, fatigue, fire prevention, and changing weather can help prevent an injury during a busy season.

Prepare for Cold and Wet Conditions

While Georgia's winters may be considered mild, cold mornings, wind, and rain can still create dangerous working conditions. Workers handling livestock, repairing equipment, irrigating plants, or harvesting crops may spend hours exposed to the weather. Wet clothing and exhaustion can increase the risk of cold stress, even when temperatures are above freezing.

Wear layers that can be adjusted as temperatures change, along with appropriate gloves and footwear that provide traction. Keep dry replacement clothing available and take breaks in a warm, sheltered location. Watch coworkers for uncontrolled shivering, confusion, or poor coordination, and seek immediate help when cold illness is suspected.

Mud, frost, and wet leaves also make steps, loading areas, and walking surfaces slippery. Clean equipment steps, use handholds, and maintain three points of contact when climbing into or out of machinery. Avoid jumping from tractors, trucks, or trailers.

Manage Fatigue and Work After Dark

Long harvest days and extended shifts can leave workers tired before they begin the drive home. Fatigue affects attention, judgment, and reaction time, creating risks both on the road and around machinery. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) identifies fatigue, shorter days, and increased farm machinery traffic as concerns during harvest season.

Supervisors should plan realistic schedules, provide regular breaks, and encourage workers to report when they are too tired to work safely. Workers should prioritize adequate sleep and pull over to a safe location if they become drowsy while driving.

Before operating equipment after dark, inspect headlights, work lights, warning lights, and reflective markings. Keep windshields and mirrors clean. Provide adequate lighting around loading areas, equipment entrances, and pedestrian routes, and keep people clear of moving vehicles.

Keep Harvest Pressure from Becoming an Equipment Hazard

During a busy season, a plugged conveyor or equipment breakdown can tempt someone to take a shortcut. Reaching into moving equipment, stepping over an operating power takeoff, or removing a guard can cause a life-changing injury.

Before clearing a blockage, cleaning equipment, or making repairs, shut down the equipment, isolate its energy sources, and follow the operation's energy-control procedures. Account for stored hydraulic pressure, raised components, and parts that can continue moving after shutdown. Keep guards in place and secure loose clothing and long hair around machinery. NIOSH has documented severe entanglement injuries involving agricultural equipment.

Review traffic patterns wherever trucks, tractors, forklifts, and workers share space. Establish clear communication before backing up, unloading, or moving equipment.

Check Heating Equipment and Prevent Fires

Agricultural workplaces often contain fuel, hay, cotton lint, crop residue, and other combustible materials. Accumulated grain dust can also create serious fire and explosion hazards.

Inspect heating equipment before seasonal use. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for placement, clearance, electrical connections, and ventilation. Keep heaters away from combustible materials and use only equipment suitable for the location. Never operate engines or fuel-burning equipment in enclosed areas where exhaust can accumulate.

Include equipment cleanliness, damaged wiring, fuel leaks, and hot bearings in routine inspections. Keep exits and fire extinguishers accessible. Review evacuation procedures and make sure workers know how to report a fire and communicate the facility's location to emergency responders.

Recognize Stress and Reinforce the Basics

Harvest deadlines, equipment problems, financial concerns, and holiday commitments can place additional strain on agricultural workers. Supervisors can help by checking in with employees, setting manageable priorities, and making it acceptable to ask for assistance.

Use brief safety meetings to discuss the work planned for that day and the hazards employees may encounter. Inspect personal protective equipment, address housekeeping problems, and encourage prompt reporting of injuries, damaged equipment, and near misses. Provide instructions in a language and manner workers understand.

As the year winds down, safety still deserves time and attention. Planning for changing weather, maintaining equipment, and looking out for coworkers can help your work team finish the season safely.