INTRODUCTION

Cotton harvest is one of the many farming activities where there can be potential hazards, exacerbated by a high pressure work situation often involving new workers using unfamiliar machinery. Cotton Australia estimates that with a bigger crop this season, there will be more new workers on farms that need to be aware of transport and picking safety requirements during this critical time.

Unfortunately, every year workers are injured and occasionally seriously maimed or killed. Growers need to be mindful of their duty of care to workers and implement practices to ensure a safe working environment for the whole crew.

This document summarises some of the key hazards to look for during cotton harvest and transporting modules to the gin, and ways to prevent accidents. The CRDC has also released a new Cotton Harvest Safety DVD, available through chemical distributors and CRDC, that gives more detailed information.

HOW HAS COTTON AUSTRALIA BEEN INVOLVED?

Cotton Australia has long been involved in developing best practice guidelines for safety on cotton farms.

In 2009 Cotton Australia established an industry “module transport” working group, following concerns about perceived inconsistencies of regulations and vehicle exemptions for the road transport of cotton modules and round bales. Represented on the working group are growers, module carriers and the Cotton Ginners Association.

Over the past year, Cotton Australia has convened a series of meetings between the working group and senior officers of the NSW RTA and NSW Police Highway Patrol.

The RTA has acknowledged the need to simplify the road transport rules and exemption notices for special purpose module transport vehicles and trailers. This will address concerns of growers and carriers and reduce the number of breaches for over-sized loads on public roads.

Cotton Australia has also been involved in the production of a plain English guide, providing explanations to some of the more common concerns and questions raised by growers.

SAFETY DURING PICKING

Staff and/or contractor induction and communication

The risk of injury can be minimised when a crew remains alert to potential dangers and actively works to minimise everyday hazards.

- Establish an induction process for every crew member or ensure your contractor has
- An induction checklist can help establish your work practice and communication expectations
- Regularly review adherence to safe operating procedures to avoid complacency
- Ensure workers are told they are not permitted to work under the influence of drugs or alcohol – otherwise you could be liable if an accident occurs
When greasing the bars, use a remote control or have a second operator in the cabin.

Ensure that spindles and heads are disengaged when cleaning.

If you need to work under the picker head at any time, make sure that it is locked into place, and never allow people in the cabin when you are underneath the picker.

Moving picking machinery
Moving picking gear within farm boundaries, between farms, and between valleys must be done with utmost caution and movements should be carefully planned.

- On farm, consult a farm map to determine the best route, checking for potential risks such as overhead power lines, dusty roads, muddy areas, irrigation channels or rough terrain.
- To avoid rolling, jack-knifing or bogging, have somebody guide you around tight bends and over narrow culverts.
- Always travel at a safe speed and drive to the conditions, keeping an adequate distance between machinery.
- On busy farms where roads are shared with other traffic, watch for other machinery, especially oncoming traffic on narrow roads. Use UHF radios to stay in contact with other people and vehicles.
- If you are traveling on public roads, be aware of legal and licence requirements and check whether you need an over-dimension legal permit.
- Before moving you should check with your State Department of Transport for the regulations surrounding agricultural machinery, specifically the requirements surrounding width and pilot vehicles. In Queensland, visit www.transport.qld.gov.au or call 132 390. In NSW, visit www.rta.nsw.gov.au or call 132 213.

Provision of protective equipment
Personal protective equipment such as earmuffs, safety glasses and dust masks can significantly reduce risk of short or long term injury.

- Workers cleaning picker screens should wear earmuffs or earplugs – noise levels can reach 100 decibels.
- Safety glasses and dust masks are essential protection from dust and pin trash during blow-down of pickers.
- Ensure visitors are aware of safe operating procedures and are provided with protective equipment.

Operating Machinery
All farm machinery can be dangerous, so operators must ensure they are safety conscious at all times.

- Always follow the directions in the owner’s manual.
- Never operate defective equipment, don’t interfere with safety devices, only operate while sitting in the driver’s seat, and keep windows and mirrors clean.
- Perform regular maintenance checks.

Operating cotton pickers
Cotton pickers have the potential to inflict serious injuries, so make sure you take precautions to minimise any risk.

- When setting up the picker, communication between the driver and mechanic on the ground is vital, and they must be able to see each other at all times.
- When greasing the bars, use a remote control or have a second operator in the cabin.
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Working Around Power Lines
Working around power lines is one of the most common and dangerous hazards during picking. To avoid electrocution:

- Check locations of power lines.
- Make sure monkeys are down when moving module builders.
- Keep machinery well clear of power lines — you don’t need to touch power lines to be injured as high voltages will cause electricity to jump gaps.
- All operators should refer to Workcover’s Code of practice – Work Near Overhead Power lines.

Next generation cotton pickers
New round-bale pickers will become more common with each new picking season and associated safety precautions for these will be new to many employees. The owner’s manual contains a comprehensive safety section and this could be photocopied for the team.

As both the John Deere 7760 and the Case IH Module Express are six-row machines, they may have different requirements for road travel as they’re wider. Both of the new on-the-go pickers have transport heights lower than the operating height, putting them safely below the maximum height for agricultural vehicles of five metres in Queensland and 4.3m in NSW.

Other options for transporting these larger pickers include floating the machinery on trucks, requiring full compliance with the regulations for freighting wide loads. Check the details carefully before you begin your journey.
**COTTON MODULE BUILDING**

Module building is a potentially hazardous area, and it is critical that both experienced and novice operators are properly trained in all aspects including site preparation, positioning of the module builder, hazardous situations, access for machinery and trucks, contamination, tarping and labelling.

- Ensure ground crews are aware of the dangers when a picker basket is being emptied into the module builder and that no one is standing in front of the module door when opened
- Keep modules in a straight line and assist the carrier to avoid misalignment of modules on the trailer that could cause an over-width load, breakage of the module and lost cotton
- The site on which your module is built will have a significant impact on ease of loading and the quality of cotton when it arrives at the gin
- Ensure ample space around the module builder so that picking equipment, trucks and infield loaders have easy access
- Tarp cotton modules immediately after construction, before expansion of the lint has taken place. They tend to stay together better during transport, as well as keep their shape in the gin yard
- Discuss with your carrier at a pre-season meeting the legal requirements for weight and height for particular truck/s
- Do not oversize or overweight your modules. Road transport regulations stipulate the maximum gross weight and height of vehicles, refer to them at all times
- The accepted industry standard for a cotton module is a maximum 2.25 metres wide at the bottom, and a maximum 1.95 metres wide at the top. Modules expand after pressing and can gain 0.5 metres or more in width. Module builders should not be elevated with blocks as this can create oversized and overweight modules
- Truck and infield loader operators should ensure modules are not excessively stretched when loading and unloading
- Cotton spilling onto the roadways during the cotton picking season may incur a fine for littering. To avoid this, clean and sweep trailers after each delivery and ensure nets on flat top trailers cover the entire module

The increased implementation of round bale pickers will reduce the need for module builders and boll-buggies during cotton harvest. While this has the potential to decrease incidents operators should maintain regular contact with others on the farm and ensure hazards such as power-lines, other machinery and people are avoided particularly when dropping the round bales off from the picker.

There are currently no industry agreed practices for load configuration onto a truck for transport. The industry will seek to develop these as the technology becomes more widely used.

Feedback from State Departments of Transport highlight the need to comply with legal dimension and width requirements and that the regulatory enforcement will be more strict for the transport of round bales where the ability to control bale dimensions is greater than with module building.

The issue of load restraint is also important and operators should make every effort to ensure round bales are adequately tied down for transportation to the gin.

**CONDITIONS WHERE ACCIDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY**

While safety is paramount at all times, the following conditions during cotton harvesting can increase the risk of accidents.

- Night time operations. Operators must take extra care to be aware of workers’ positions on the ground, workers should wear reflective safety vests and audible warning sounds on machinery should be activated
- Hot, dry weather conditions combined with overheated machinery can cause fire. It is imperative that a no smoking policy is set out and enforced and a specific fire plan and well maintained fire equipment should be in place
- A wet weather or dewy morning maintenance routine may present a changed situation and slippery machinery for the crew
MODULE TRANSPORT

Both NSW and Queensland have instituted the same maximum statutory dimension limits for vehicles and their loads on public roads. These are 2.5m width, 4.6m height, and 4.2m rear overhang. Some differences between the states may exist with regards to enforcement and exemptions to these limits.

The RTA in NSW and Queensland is cracking down on breaches to transport legislation in this area. Growers need to be aware that ALL parties in the module transport supply chain now have a clear legal responsibility to ensure road safety and legislation requirements are met. This is referred to as the ‘chain of responsibility’ and includes growers, module builder operators, loaders, drivers, operators and schedulers and receivers. Employers or managers of a farm may also be personally liable for breaches by an employee.

The law requires you to take all ‘reasonable steps’ to prevent your actions or conduct from causing or contributing to a breach. In addition, the law also prohibits you from:
• making demands that you know or ought to know would cause a breach
• coercing or encouraging breaches

LINKS AND RESOURCES

To order a copy of the free CRDC Safe Harvest DVD, call (02) 6792 4088 or see your local chemical distributor.

Cotton Picking Guidance Notes – Farmsafe Australia Inc
www.farmsafe.org.au

Cotton Australia’s Website –

NSW
Workcover Code of practice - Work Near Overhead Powerlines
http://www.workcover.nsw.gov.au

QLD
Guidelines for Transporting Cotton Modules
www.transport.qld.gov.au

Electrical Safety Code of Practice - Working Near Exposed Live Parts
http://www.deir.qld.gov.au

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on implementing safe practices while picking, contact one of Cotton Australia’s Regional Managers:

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