

Making the Invisible Visible

- Advisory Services for Increased Occupational Health in Agricultural

Alwall Svennefelt, Catharina^a, Ljung, Magnus^b

^a*Department of Work Science, Business Economics and Environmental Psychology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Box 88, 230 53 Alnarp, Sweden. e-mail: Catharina.Alwall@slu.se*

^b*National Competence Centre for Advisory Services, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Box 234, 53223 Skara, Sweden. e-mail: Magnus.Ljung@slu.se*

Purpose: The aim of this empirical study was to gain a deeper understanding of farmers' perspectives on farm based risks and safety issues after having participated in a broad intervention program in Sweden called "Safe Farmers Common Sense". The study is part of a PhD-project analyzing measures to increase farmers' occupational health.

Context description; problem domain; conceptual framework: Both fatal and nonfatal injuries are a severe problem in Swedish agriculture. Therefore the Ministry of Agriculture established a national injury prevention program in 2008, labeled Safe Farmers Common Sense. Its objective was to reduce the number of accidents by 50% by the year of 2013. The main strategy was by changing farmer attitude and behavior through information and educational activities. Farmer's participation was for free, and the total cost of the program was app 7,5 million Euros .

Research questions and design; project approach: We applied a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews involving both farmers and advisors. We discussed the factors which might influence farmer's work prevention work, and the role and importance of advisory services on occupational health have had. As a result we developed a set of recommendations on how the advisory services might be improved.

Data collection and analysis; evidence: The study took place during the spring of 2013 in Skåne, the southernmost part of Sweden. The farmers interviewed represented different locations, production systems, size of agricultural enterprises, gender, part- or full time farmers, etc. For each geographic area two-three advisors and supervisors had been active in the intervention program. Choosing Skåne was strategic while it has a variety of farming systems and higher number of farmers involved.

We analyzed the interviews by using the software ATLAS.ti. Four empirical themes emerged; experiences of participating in Safe Farmers Common Sense; perception of risks and safety; incentives and hinders for preventive work; and, the role of advisory services for farm level activities.

Results: Over the five year project period more than 48.000 Swedish farmers participated in the intervention program. In total 185 advisers were trained out of which 75 % was farmers themselves. These advisers were supported by 12 Regional Coordinators from The Federation of Swedish Farmers.

The interviews reveal that farmers perceive risks as a natural part of daily work. Many farmers have coped risky situations without being injured earlier, why they might perceive them as manageable. Risks are normalized in farming activities.

The advisory activities resulted in specific measures in connection with the intervention, but did not change routines or working strategies. Daily routines are important for efficient farm management, the negative consequence being "blind spots". The routines make the farmer reinterpret any change in the environment, that is, emerging risks, so that they fit within their behavioral patterns which means that the risks are ignored or misinterpreted.

Conclusion: In our study we analyze several factors which prevent risk avoiding behaviors and routines. One important measure is to develop the advisors ability to conduct dialogues where farmers' own interpretation and management of practical situations becomes visible, so that they themselves can see how routines and risks are linked. It is not only farmers who are limited by specific mental models and behavioral pattern, the same is true for the advisors. Making what today is invisible visible for the farmer means introducing methods and themes where advisors themselves not always feel comfortable. As much as risk management is about operative decisions on a daily basis and strategic decisions developing standardized management, it is also about values, norms and attitudes. To raise such issues in an advisory situation and being able to connect such issues to farmers' behavior might be challenging, but it is the ways to do it.