

17. FIREARMS SAFETY ON FARMS



This Guidance Note has been produced in consultation with a wide range of interested people around Australia, including farmers and industry representatives, farm women, psychiatrists and mental health workers, police, trainers and others. The document is intended for use by farm managers, farm workers and farm families as they consider the important issue of firearms safety on the farm.

THE HAZARD

Firearms are used on many Australian farms to control vermin and destroy sick or unwanted stock. The current firearms legislation recognises that farming communities have a genuine need for firearms as a part of their farm management.

Firearm death rates are generally higher in rural and remote regions than urban areas. The highest rate of firearm deaths per capita occurs in low population density rural and remote regions, with the relative risk of death between 3 and 5 times greater than urban areas. The major hazard of firearms use is injury or death resulting from self harm, interpersonal violence or accidental shooting. Suicide accounts for 75% of firearm deaths, so it is an important issue to discuss here. Of the remaining firearms deaths, 15% are due to interpersonal violence (including domestic violence) and 5% are accidental.

Exposure to loud noise from firearms can permanently damage hearing. The effect of noise exposure accumulates so that hearing loss slowly worsens with continued exposure. Firearm noise can cause tinnitus (noise or ringing in the ears) which indicates that damage to the ears has occurred.



¹ *Injury by Firearms Australia*, (1996) James Harrison; Jerry Moller; Stan Bordeaux, National Injury Surveillance Unit, Australian Injury Prevention Bulletin, Issue 13 (Supplement), October 1996 (Bulletin)

HAZARD IDENTIFICATION

Assessment of firearm safety on the farm should look for all factors which cause risk of injury from firearms. Consider characteristics of the firearm, the shooting environment, the shooter and the interaction between these.

When considering the firearm, look at:

- Storage of firearms and ammunition.
- The nature of the firearm; whether it is a shotgun, rifle, airgun or pistol.
- The level of noise exposure to the shooter.
- Maintenance of the firearm, including functional safety catches and the risks associated with blocked barrels and inappropriate reloading procedures.
- Whether the firearm is appropriate for the current legislation and your licence in your state/territory. Check with your local police.

Characteristics of the shooting environment to consider are:

- The Shooters Danger Zone - the area within your firing range. For example, 4.5km for a high powered rifle, 1.5km for a .22 calibre rim fire rifle and 180m for a shotgun.
- The available light - is shooting during the hours of darkness absolutely essential? Shooters using spotlights should remember that a spotlight illuminates only a small portion of the firing range.
- Visibility - dust, fog or glare during sunset or sunrise may reduce the ability to positively identify targets.
- The firearms noise exposure to children and other bystanders.
- When hunting with a group - can your companions be kept in sight? When destroying vermin on properties, one person should do the shooting.
- Do you need to shoot from a moving vehicle? Bumps in the terrain can significantly change the aim of the shooter.

When considering the shooter, look at:

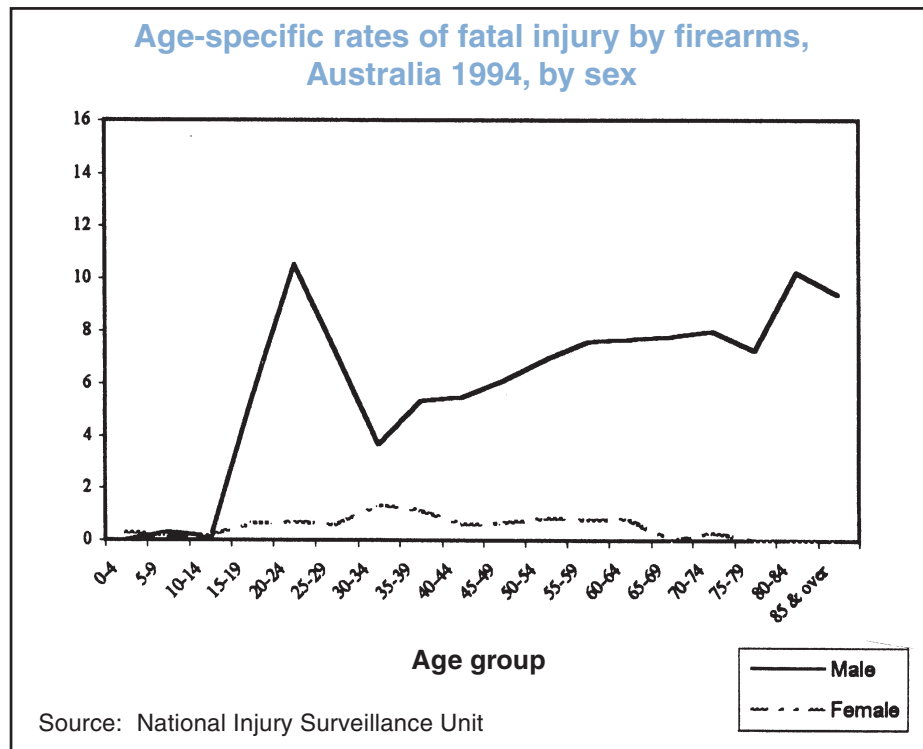
- Does the shooter have a current appropriate shooting licence and have training in safety awareness and lawful use of firearms?
- The age of the shooter - junior shooters must have a permit, and in most states are required to be under the supervision of a competent licensed adult (check with your local police).
- The mental and physical condition of the shooter - unsuitable warning signs include: depressive behaviour, intoxication by either alcohol or drugs, aggressive behaviour, verbal expression of suicidal intent or other mental conditions, for example dementia.

Further reading on hazards associated with firearms can be found in these guidance notes:

- ⇒ Dealing with Stress on the Farm (Number 24)
- ⇒ Children on Farms (Number 7)
- ⇒ Noise on Farms (Number 4)

1. Who is at risk

All shooters and those associated with firearms are at risk of being injured or killed. Across all regions, the young adult and older age group males have the highest death rates for firearms.



Males account for the majority of firearm deaths in Australia (90%), with the most of these deaths due to suicide. In contrast, approximately two-thirds of the non-fatal firearm related injuries are accidental.¹

People who are at risk of committing suicide and are familiar with the use of firearms, are at a high risk of death. The suicide rate in rural and remote areas is particularly high among the 15-24 and 45-54 year old males.

All people associated with firearms are at risk of noise induced hearing loss; the typical noise level at operating distance results in instantaneous damage. Those who have repetitive use of high powered rifles and shot guns are at particular risk of damage.

Children are particularly at risk of accidental injury and noise induced hearing loss from firearms.

2. *Nature of potential injury/illness*

Firearms are the most lethal method used in suicide attempts, with an 85% probability of *death*.² An immediate method of suicide such as by firearm presents little opportunity for intervention between the suicide event and death, especially in a remote area where access to emergency services may not be readily available.³

Non-fatal injuries may also occur with firearms, head injuries are the most common, followed by lower and upper limb injuries.

Injury or damage caused by *hearing loss* is not generally life threatening, although can result in considerable impairment. The affected person is usually not totally 'deaf' but has reduced ability to discriminate or understand what is being said.

3. *Degree of risk*

When assessing the degree of risk associated with firearm use, consider the following questions:

How often and for how long are people exposed to the firearm hazard?

The number of times and the length of time a firearm is used influences the degree of risk. The more often a firearm is used, the more likely an injury will occur, including noise induced hearing loss.

How common is firearm injury?

While the likelihood of firearm injury or death is not common, when considering the tragic consequences for the community it is still far too common.

How severe is the likely resulting injury?

Although *death* by firearms on farms is not common, the risk associated with owning and using firearms on farms, particularly from suicide, must be assessed as **HIGH**.

What are the legal risks?

Firearms owners and users should also be aware of risk of prosecution if firearms are not registered, stored and used in accordance with state legislation (see firearms legislation for your state).

² Kleck, G. (1992). *Point Blank: guns and violence in America*. New York, Aldine de Gryter.

³ Baume, P. and Clinton, M. (1996). Structural, personal vulnerability, cultural and social crisis explanations of youth suicide in rural Australia. Forthcoming.

The following control measures will not be suitable for everybody. They are presented as options that are available to reduce the risk of firearm injury while not interfering with farm productivity.

1. *Elimination (or removal) of the hazard*

Elimination of the firearm hazard could mean the firearm is not used for a particular job or removed from the property if not required or only required occasionally. The recent gun Buy Back program is an example of the elimination of hazards associated with a certain class of firearm.

2. *Substitution for a lesser hazard*

The substitution control measure is when another means is used to perform a particular job rather than using a firearm. The employment of professional shooters for control of vermin is an example of transferring the firearm hazard.

3. *Isolate the hazard*

Firearm and ammunition should be stored separately in locked storage containers. Keys should be kept separately to both firearms and ammunition, out of the reach of children.

4. *Engineering design/options*

The addition of a muzzle brake, for a large calibre rifle, may reduce the noise and recoil of a firearm for the user, however this may increase the noise for bystanders at close distance to the shooter.

A gun lock can be attached to the firearm, this requires a key to unlock the firearm for use. This guards against unauthorised use by children or preventing use if stolen. A gun lock is also useful for the safe transportation of firearms.

5. *Safer work practices and procedures*

Pre-operational

In most states, only shooters who are licensed are permitted to use firearms (non licensed persons may use firearms under supervision in South Australia). It is the responsibility of the owner of the firearm not to allow the firearm to come into the possession of a person who is not licensed.

Improving work procedures includes training in the safe handling of firearms, including the compulsory firearms safety awareness course or exam.

Regular maintenance of the firearm, including the safety catch, is essential.

Any person under high levels of stress, temporarily depressed or suffering from mental or physical illness should not have access to a firearm; even when there is no legal barrier to ownership. It is wise to store firearms with someone else, if any member of the household is experiencing difficult or upsetting times.

Operational

Maintain safe handling procedures while using a firearm.

Some basic rules for firearm safety are:

- **Treat every firearm as being loaded.** If it has not been continually in your possession, there is a chance that it may be loaded.
- **Always point firearms in a safe direction.** Do not point a loaded or unloaded firearm at anybody, nor aim at anything you do not wish to shoot.
- **Safety catches should be engaged at all times when not firing.** Do not let their value give you a false sense of security.
- **Never have loaded firearms in the car, home or camp.** Accidental discharge can cause death, injury or property damage. When travelling carry only empty firearms, preferably with the action open and the bolt removed or dismantled, in an appropriate carrying case.
- **Identify your target and what is behind it.** Never shoot over the top of hills or ridges. Make sure your target is positively identified before firing at it, and keep your finger off trigger until that time.
If in doubt do not shoot.
- **Never fire at hard surfaces or water.** A ricochet may occur and end with a tragic result.
- Store firearms and ammunition separately. Make sure that firearms and ammunition are kept out of the reach of children.
- **No alcohol or drugs when handling firearms.** Alcohol dulls and slows mental and physical faculties.
- **Do not climb fences or obstacles with loaded firearms.** Ensure that your firearm is unloaded and the muzzle pointing in a safe direction. Carefully ease the firearm with its action open under the bottom strand of a fence and place it on the other side. If with another person, one should climb the fence unimpeded while the other passes both firearms, one at a time, either over the top or under the bottom.
- **Do not run with a loaded firearm.**
- **Tell someone where you are going and when you are expected back. Report to base as regularly as possible.**

Post-operational

Always store firearms and ammunition in separately locked containers, with the key under the supervision of the owner.



6. *Personal Protective Equipment and Clothing*

Use of ear muffs or ear plugs will reduce the effects of noise induced hearing loss. Specifically designed ear plugs for shooting are available, so that users can hear others talking while maintaining protection from the noise of the firearm.

When selecting hearing protection, consider the following:

- Evidence that the muff or plugs meet Australian Standards. This is indicated on the packaging.
- The SLC80 (Sound Level Conversion value) rating should be as high as possible, 25-30 dB(A) is preferable (See Guidance Note Number 4 - Noise on Farms).

7. *Screening to detect early noise-induced hearing loss*

Hearing screening should be made available to workers exposed to firearm noise on farms. Your local Community Health Services can advise on how to access suitable services so that people with early signs of hearing impairment are detected and suitable changes to work practices are made.

4. *First Aid*

An effective First Aid technique can dramatically improve a person's chance of survival in the event of a firearm injury. At least two individuals on each farm should be trained in First Aid.

First aid kits should be in handy locations on the farm. The size of the kit will vary according to the number of workers on the farm. The legal requirements vary from state to state and should be checked with your local Occupational Health & Safety Authority.

Accessible radios or mobile telephones are communication devices that can reduce the risk by minimising the length of time before an injured person is found.

8. *Farm suicide awareness*

Farming communities should be aware of the high rate of suicide in the rural community, particularly by firearms. This high rate illustrates the increased risk that members of the farming community face. Farm families need to be aware of the early signs of people at risk of committing suicide. Although it is not possible to prevent every suicide, it may be possible to identify changes in behaviour and common crises that may precipitate suicidal behaviour. These feelings can be heightened by alcohol or drug consumption.

Knowledge of risk factors and warning signs may help people to intervene in the suicide process. It is important to note that these signs should be viewed in the context of the individual involved, in relation to their 'normal' behaviours.



Some warning signs to be aware of:

- An individual's predisposition, such as a depressive illness or condition.
- An acute life crisis, such as a financial stress, marriage breakdown or relationship breakdown with a boy/girl friend.
- Personality changes, such as nervousness, outbursts of anger, impulsive or apathetic behaviour, withdrawing from family or friends.
- Unresolved conflict, such as adolescent child-parent breakdown in communication.
- Feelings of failure in important issues such as school, sporting or peer relationships or farming job performance.
- Recent suicide of a friend or relative, may lead to copycat behaviour.
- Expressing suicidal thoughts in either a direct or indirect way.
- Sudden or extreme changes in weight, sleeping patterns.
- Making a Will or other 'final arrangements'.

Within farming families suicide could sometimes be seen as the honourable way out of a seemingly impossible situation. In fact, suicide is not the honourable way out, as the devastation left behind in the family is generally extreme. Farm families need to be aware of warning signs and take practical action to intervene if they feel a member of their family or community is at risk.

Practical suggestions for intervention:

- Maintain or restore communication with a withdrawn person.
- Try to sound calm and understanding, **take the person seriously**.
- Emphasise that problems must be tackled one at a time; use a positive approach to highlight desirable alternatives.
- Where there is concern over the mental state of a family member, or worker, a responsible person should remove the key to firearms. This action will reduce access to the firearm and establishes a possible point for intervention if the person requests the key.
- Where the owner of the firearm feels to be, or appears to be, at significant risk the firearm should be handed to the police or another responsible person for the period of concern.
- Encourage the person to talk with the most appropriate person eg local GP or another acceptable person.
- If the person refuses or is incapable of seeking help, consult with a health or welfare professional for advice on how to handle the situation.

RELEVANT LEGISLATION AND STANDARDS

The **Occupational Health and Safety Act** relevant to each State/Territory. These require employers to ensure a safe workplace for all workers and visitors to the workplace, and the provision of safe systems of work for workers.

Firearm legislation (for each state/territory)

NSW	Firearms Act 1996, No.46 Firearms (General) Regulations 1997
VIC	Firearms Act 1996, No. 66 (plus amendments) Firearms Regulations 1997, No. 32
TAS	Firearms Act & Regulations 1996
SA	Firearms Act 1977 Regulations under Firearms Act Compensation Regulations under the Firearms Act
WA	Firearms Act 1973 Firearms Regulations 1974
NT	NT Firearms Act & Regulations 1997
QLD	Weapons Act & Regulations 1992
ACT	Firearms Act 1996, No. 75 Firearms Regulations 1997

A special meeting of Police Ministers was held on 10 May 1996 at which the following agreements were reached by all Australian Governments regarding gun control.

The following firearms are banned apart from military, police and occupational categories who have been licensed for a specified purpose (eg the extermination of feral animals).

- self loading centre fire rifles
- self loading and pump action shotguns
- self loading rim fire rifles

A primary producer may be permitted access to self loading rim fire rifles and self loading and pump action shotguns, each with limited capacities, under the occupational category.

Each state and territory jurisdiction will be responsible for maintaining a firearms registration system which will be linked across Australia.

Firearm owners must satisfy authorities that they have a genuine reason for owning a firearm, with personal protection not a valid reason for owning, possessing or using a firearm.

To apply for a licence you must be over 18 years of age, a fit and proper person and satisfy safe storage requirements. In addition licences will be for a period of up to five years and will not be issued less than 28 days after applying.

All shooters must receive the highest level of safety training, with first time applicants required to complete an accredited course in safety training.

Legislation states that a firearm licence can be refused or a firearm may be seized if a person:

- is shown to not be of good character
- contravenes the firearm law
- has unsafe storage
- no longer has a genuine reason
- obtained the licence by deception
- is the subject of an Apprehended Violence Order, Domestic Violence Order, Restraining Order or conviction for a serious offence involving a firearm or actual or threatened violence within the past five to ten years.
- has a mental or physical condition which would render the applicant unsuitable for owning, possessing or using a firearm

A permit is required for every firearm acquired, with a waiting period of at least 28 days. Sales may only be conducted by or through licensed firearms dealers. Firearms owners may only purchase ammunition for firearms for which they are licensed. Following the conclusion of the amnesty ("Gun Buy Back"), severe penalties will be applied in every State and Territory to breaches of the firearms control laws.

USEFUL REFERENCES

1. Keep safety in your sights - Owning and using firearms in the safe way (1997) Department of Primary Industry and Energy Shopfront. (Video)
2. Gun Use - How It Affects You (1996) Australian Government / Police (Pamphlet)
3. Firearm Safety Awareness Handbooks - Available in every state from your local police station, local gun club or association or your local firearms dealer.
4. You Don't Have to Yell at Me - Hearing Conservation on Farms. Australian Agricultural Health Unit. Moree. (Video)

CONTACTS

Your local Police station

Your local Firearms dealer

Hotline for Firearms Owners

Telephone: 1800 240 074

Telephone: 06 245 7405

Consultant Audiometrist - Farm hearing

New England Area Health Service

180 Peel Street

Tamworth NSW 2340

Telephone: 02 6766 2555

Facsimile: 02 6766 3967

Mental Health Foundation Australia

270 Church Street

Richmond VIC 3121

Telephone: 03 9427 0407

Facsimile: 03 9427 1294

Australian Agricultural Health Unit

PO Box 256

Moree NSW 2400

Telephone: 02 6752 8210

Facsimile: 02 6752 6639

Suicide Prevention Australia

PO Box K998
Haymarket NSW 2000
Telephone: 02 9211 1788
Facsimile: 02 9211 0392

National Association for Loss and Grief

NSW Telephone: 02 9988 3376
QLD Telephone: 07 3822 2633
VIC Telephone: 03 9688 4760
SA Telephone: 08 8201 2259
TAS Telephone: 03 6228 0313
WA Telephone: 08 9385 1212

Your local counsellor or minister**Lifeline**

Telephone: 131 114

Kids' Help Line

Telephone: 1800 073 008

State/Territory safety awareness courses as listed below:**New South Wales**

NSW Firearms Safety Awareness Council Limited
PO Box 393
Terrey Hills NSW 2084
Telephone: (02) 9486 3077
Facsimile: (02) 9486 3497

Victoria

Your local police station for the location of your nearest District Firearms Officer

Queensland

Your local gun club for a licensed provider

South Australia

Regency TAFE
Days Road
Regency Park SA 5010
Telephone: (08) 8348 4434
Facsimile: (08) 8268 7904

Western Australia

Your local police station

Tasmania

TAFE Training Services
Hobart Institute of TAFE
GPO Box 2015
Hobart TAS 7001
Telephone: (03) 6233 7361
Facsimile: (03) 6233 7707

Northern Territory

Northern Territory Firearms Policy and Recording Unit
PO Box 39764
Winnellie NT 0821
Telephone: (08) 8922 3543
Facsimile: (08) 8922 3540

Australian Capital Territory

Weapons Registry
GPO Box 401
Canberra ACT 2601
Telephone: (02) 6245 7250
Facsimile: (02) 6245 7259

State/Territory Occupational Health & Safety Organisations as listed below:

Workcover New South Wales : Ph 131 050
Victorian Workcover Authority: Ph (03) 9628 8188
Queensland Division of Workplace Health & Safety: Ph (1800) 177 717 or (07) 3247 4711
South Australian WorkCover Corporation: Ph (08) 8226 3120
Worksafe Western Australia: Ph (08) 9327 8777
Tasmanian Workplace Standards Authority: Ph (03) 6233 7657
Northern Territory Work Health Authority: Ph (08) 8999 5010
Australian Capital Territory WorkCover: Ph (02) 6205 0200



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