onside

for Contractors and Service Providers

The rural safety handbook

Disclaimer: This is intended as a guide only. For specific legal advice about health and safety regulations, please consult your local regulator.

onside

Contents

If you're a contractor working across agriculture, you already know this:

Every property is different. The risk isn't.

You move between properties with different layouts, hazards, and rules.
One day it's livestock. The next it's machinery or chemicals.
Sometimes you get a proper induction. Sometimes you're left to fill the gaps.
And if something goes wrong, you carry the risk.

Legally, safety is supposed to be shared. In reality? It's fragmented between the landowner, whoever's running the job, and whoever's on-site that day.

That's where incidents happen. Not because people don't care, but because critical information gets lost in the handover, assumptions replace conversations, and familiarity becomes complacency.

Safety should be treated as something that travels with the work.

When handovers are clear, responsibilities are understood, and site knowledge carries forward, contractors work with greater confidence, consistency, and trust. Safety becomes part of how good work gets done.

That’s why we create this guide - but who are we?

We’re Onside. We created a rural compliance app entirely for the agriculture community. That’s what sets us apart. We’re ag-only and proud of it. We help protect people working at over 22,000 properties, every day. From safety to visitor to biosecurity management, we make things easier for contractors.

We’re trying to give back something that's been lost: time.

I hope you find something useful in here.

Something to keep your people safe.

Ryan Higgs
Co-founder & CEO
Onside

onside

Shared safety responsibilities

Working on third-party properties

In Australia and New Zealand, health and safety is a shared responsibility. Under the WHS Act (AU) and HSWA (NZ), the primary duty of care lies with the Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU) - a broad term covering farmers, contractors, and service providers.

Managing overlapping duties

When a contractor works on someone else's property, it becomes a shared workplace. That means safety responsibilities overlap. The property owner controls site conditions; the contractor controls how the work is done.

Both influence the work. Both are PCBUs.
Both parties must consult, cooperate, and coordinate.

Influence and control

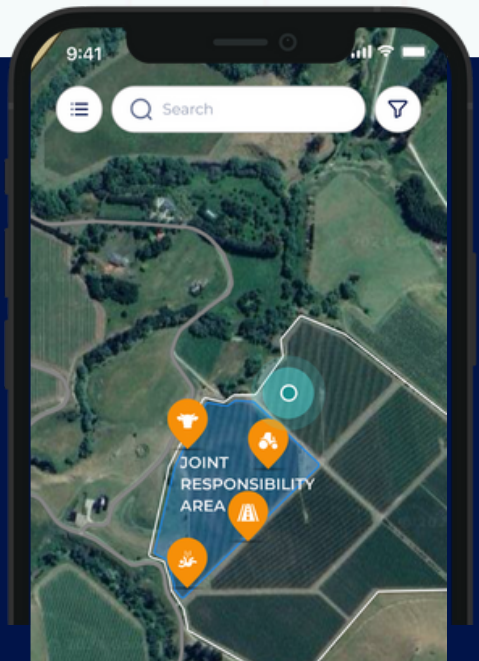
The scope of your duty depends on your level of control:

- Contractors: Control specialised tools and procedures.
- Property Owners: Control site-specific risks (e.g., power lines, livestock).

Regulatory compliance requires proactive dialogue to ensure no safety gaps emerge between these two spheres of control.

Why map and communicate areas of shared responsibility?

Using systems like **Onside**, digitally mapping properties, shared zones, and site-specific risks creates a single, accessible source of truth. Risks are communicated before arrival, acknowledged on entry, and carried forward across visits.



WorkSafe's '3 Cs'

WorkSafe mandates three key actions for overlapping duties:

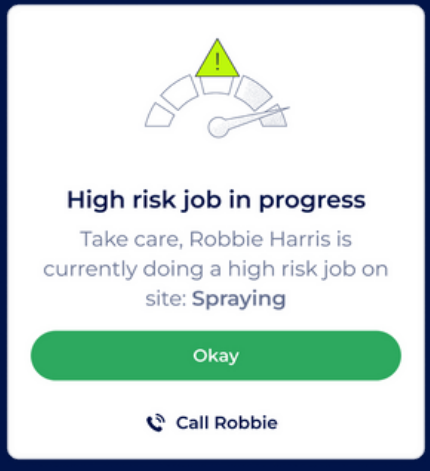
Consult: Property owners highlight risks like aggressive livestock, unstable ground, or traffic flow. Contractors explain how they'll manage task-related risks, such as lock-out procedures or exclusion zones. This might happen through a site walk-through, a phone call, or daily check-ins.

Cooperate: If work is paused during milking to avoid vehicle conflicts, that pause is respected. If a contractor identifies a new hazard; like asbestos in a shed - it's raised immediately and addressed together. Safety responsibilities are shared, and decisions aren't undermined by time pressure or convenience.

Coordinate: Activities are sequenced to avoid clashes. Boundaries are clear. Everyone knows who is responsible for what. Contractors understand who else is on site, what's happening nearby, and how conditions may change during the day.

How can your teams consult, cooperate and coordinate?

A shared digital check-in system can link people to tasks makes high-risk work visible as it happens, helping everyone on site understand what's underway, adjust sequencing, and avoid conflicts - without chasing updates or relying on assumptions.



The handover problem

Identifying failure points in communication

The transition point where a contractor begins work on a client's property is often the most critical moment for safety management. The 'handover problem' describes the breakdown in communication that occurs when information about site risk is not effectively transferred from the property owner to the contractor.

In the rural sector, where handovers are often informal or handled via text message, the potential for catastrophic misunderstanding is high.

Mechanisms of communication failure

Research and incident investigations highlight several common failure points during the handover process. These include information asymmetry, where the property owner knows the location of an unstable bridge but assumes it is "common sense" to avoid it - and the 'normalisation of deviance,' where existing safety breaches on the property are not mentioned because they have become part of the everyday routine.

The cost of poor coordination

A 2022 South Canterbury fatality highlights the danger of 'general' inductions. A worker was crushed by a hydraulic tailgate because there was no specific traffic plan or exclusion zones for spotters.

The lesson: A general site induction is not enough for high-risk work. You must perform a task-specific handover detailing exactly where people stand and how vehicles move.

Handover strategies

To mitigate these risks, service providers must take an active role in the handover process. Regulatory guidance suggests that contractors should not merely wait for the client to provide information but should proactively ask a series of structured questions.

This level of administrative coordination prevents confusion in a crisis and ensures that legal obligations are met.

Information category	Handover questions for contractors
Work Activity	What other work (e.g., spraying, harvesting) is happening nearby?
Site Hazards	Are there any unusual terrain hazards, power lines, or aggressive livestock?
Emergency Procedures	What is the muster point and the primary method for contacting emergency services?
Communication	What is the agreed "time-in/time-out" reporting procedure?
Coordination	How will we signal to each other if conditions change during the day?

Redefining lone-worker risk

In the agri-adjacent context, lone-worker risk is often mischaracterised.

It is not simply the act of being physically alone; rather, it is the state of being isolated from the assistance of others in the event of an emergency.

A service technician working in a remote paddock with no mobile reception is a lone worker, but so is an electrician working alone in a farm workshop after hours if no one is aware they are there.

Defining isolated and remote work

SafeWork define remote or isolated work as situations where it is difficult or impossible to get immediate attention from rescue or medical services due to location, time, or the nature of the work.

For rural contractors, the risks are compounded by several factors:

Communication Gaps

Large properties often have significant "dead zones" where mobile phones do not work.

Delayed Response Times

The physical distance from emergency services in remote Australia or New Zealand can lead to hours-long delays in treatment.

Environmental Hazards

Extreme weather, difficult terrain, and the presence of dangerous machinery or livestock increase the likelihood of an incident occurring in the first place.

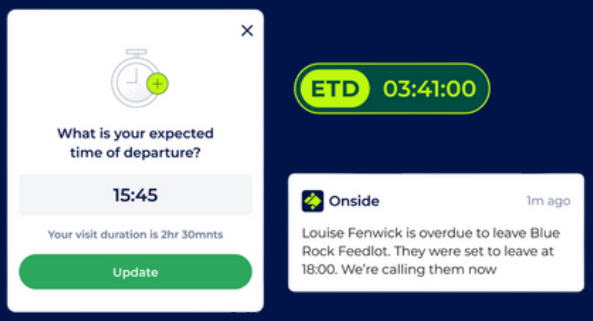
Psychosocial risks of lone work

Recent shifts in WHS laws, particularly in Australia, have brought the psychosocial risks of lone work into sharper focus. Working in isolation for long periods can lead to psychological strain, reduced situational awareness, and an increased likelihood of making errors. Furthermore, the lack of immediate support can make a worker feel more pressured to push through fatigue or difficult conditions, as there is nobody present to provide a second opinion (or observe signs of impairment).

Mandatory controls and systems of work

For PCBUs whose workers operate in isolation, there is a legal requirement to provide a system of work that ensures effective communication. This is no longer an optional safety feature but a regulatory expectation.

Control level	Implementation
Primary System	Satellite phones, radios, or GPS-enabled distress beacons where mobile signal is absent.
Procedural System	Mandatory check-in protocols at defined times or when moving to a new location.
Emergency Response	A plan that triggers an immediate search if a check-in is missed by a specified timeframe.
Supervision	Periodic visits or "buddy systems" for high-risk tasks, even if the work is performed solo



How can I improve the safety and visibility of lone workers?

Digital systems can capture expected departure times, automate follow-ups, and escalate missed check-outs in real time ensure that silence is treated as a signal; triggering a fast, consistent response without depending on individuals to notice something's wrong.

Pre-starts and inductions

The induction is the standard tool for introducing contractors to site safety.

However, the "tick and flick" culture - where workers sign a form they haven't read for a site they haven't seen - is a major point of vulnerability for both the host and the contractor.

Regulators are increasingly critical of generic inductions that fail to address the specific, changing risks of a rural property.

The decay of static inductions

A site induction performed during a drought may be entirely irrelevant three months later during a wet spring.

In the rural sector, conditions change rapidly. Springs in New Zealand, for example, introduce dynamic risks such as unstable slopes, slippery tracks, and aggressive calving cows. A contractor who relies on a six-month-old induction is operating without a current risk profile.

SafeWork NSW and WorkSafe NZ differentiate between three critical layers of safety briefing that contractors must navigate:

- **Generic induction:** Focuses on the employer's general policies and the worker's rights. This is usually "set and forget" until a major policy change occurs.
- **Site-specific induction:** Focuses on the permanent features of the property: e.g. power lines, muster points, and permanent no-go zones.
- **Task-specific risk assessment (SWMS/JSA)**: A dynamic, daily assessment of the specific job, the current weather, the equipment being used, and the other people on-site.

Safe work method statements

The role of Safe Work Method Statements (SWMS)

For high-risk work, particularly in construction-adjacent rural tasks like electrical or irrigation infrastructure, a *SWMS* is a mandatory requirement. A *SWMS* must be site-specific; a generic document is unlikely to satisfy an inspector after an incident. It must detail the sequence of tasks, the specific risks encountered at the site, and the measures to be applied.

Crucially, the *SWMS* must be understood by the people doing the work, which may require translations or visual aids for diverse workforces.

Dynamic risk assessment (DRA) vs. "Tick and Flick"

Checklists are not a substitute for judgment. A tick and flick approach encourages workers to treat safety as an administrative hurdle rather than a protective process.

Dynamic Risk Assessment (*DRA*) is the process of continuously identifying and managing risks as they evolve throughout the day. For an agronomist, this might mean stopping work if a sudden wind shift makes chemical application dangerous, or for a fencing crew to reassess a slope after rain.

Induction Element	Frequency	Regulatory Standard
Site Entry Briefing	Every new visit or when site conditions significantly change.	Must be site-specific and recorded.
Daily Pre-Start	Every morning before work.	Should involve all workers on-site.
SWMS Review	Daily, or whenever work method changes.	Must be available to workers and supervisors.
Competency Check	Before a worker operates new or different plant.	"Prove people are trained and competent".

Familiarity and complacence

The risk of "we've been here before/ we know this place"

For service providers who visit the same client properties for years - such as shearers, vets, or transport drivers - familiarity is one of the most significant hidden hazards. Cognitive biases such as the "illusion of control" and "complacency" lead experienced workers to underestimate risks they have successfully navigated in the past.

The psychology of farm safety

Farms are unique because they are often multi-generational homes as well as workplaces. This domestic atmosphere can lead to a more relaxed attitude toward safety. Farmers and regular contractors often "become accustomed to hazards and accept risks as part of everyday life".

This is evidenced by the fact that older, more experienced workers (over 55) are significantly more likely to die in farm incidents, often involving tractors or quad bikes they have operated for decades.

Seasonal and environmental fluidity

The belief that "I know this paddock" is frequently undermined by the seasonal fluidity of the rural environment.

- **Terrain changes:** Washouts, new animal tracks, or seasonal boggy patches can turn a familiar route into a rollover risk for a quad or tractor.
- **Livestock shifts:** Animals that are docile during most of the year can become highly aggressive during mating or calving seasons.
- **Infrastructure decay:** Gates, latches, and power take-off (PTO) guards can degrade between visits, creating new points of failure.

Mitigating complacency

Mitigating complacency through structural checks

To combat the risk of familiarity, regulators recommend "institutionalizing" safety checks. This means making safety a "normal part of conversations" rather than an exceptional event. For the service provider, this involves:

- **Pre-operational checks:** Never assuming machinery is in the same condition it was yesterday. This is particularly important for tractors and quad bikes, which are the leading causes of death in both AU and NZ.
- **Active riding techniques:** For quad bike operators, safety depends on active riding - shifting weight and position. Complacency often leads to "passive" riding, which significantly increases the risk of a rollover on slopes.
- **Hazard reporting:** Encouraging workers to report even small changes on a client's property (e.g., a loose wire or a new rut) so that the information can be shared with the host and other contractors.

Complacency Driver	Practical "Proof" for Contractors	Regulatory Basis
Routine Tasks	Simple records of "who, what, when, and what decision" regarding a safety matter.	WHS Consultation Code.
Site Familiarity	Maintenance logs, pre-start checklists, and records of ROPS/guards being fitted.	Rural Plant Code of Practice.
Expert Bias	Training matrix showing unit standards (e.g., NZQA 20848 for 4WD) and refreshers.	"Safer Seasons" White Paper.
Hazard Management	A hazard register that is updated when conditions change (e.g., weather).	Farm Safety Basics.

Knowing vs. proving

The standard of due diligence and evidence

In the event of a inspection or investigation, the ability of a contractor to prove they were working safely is as important as the safety practices themselves. The "gap between knowing and proving" is often where businesses face legal and financial issues.

The legal standard: ‘reasonably practicable’

The standard of ‘reasonably practicable’ requires a balancing of the likelihood of a hazard occurring against the severity of the harm and the availability/cost of control measures. Proving this standard was met requires a documented record of the decision-making process.

While some situations are "risk-based," others are "compliance-based". A compliance-based failure - such as failing to keep a training record or a hazardous substance inventory - can lead to an improvement notice or a fine, even if no one is hurt, because it proves a failure in the system.

Evidence standards: what inspectors look for

Induction Records	Signed and dated forms showing exactly what site-specific hazards were discussed.
Training/ Competency Evidence	Short, written records documenting who is authorised to operate specific machinery
Consultation Logs	Evidence that the contractor and client actually talked—this could be a site diary entry, a saved text thread about a hazard, or a formal meeting minute.
Maintenance Logs	Detailed records of inspections and repairs for vehicles and plant, following manufacturer recommendations.
Health Monitoring	Records showing that workers exposed to hazardous chemicals or noise have undergone regular health checks.

Lessons from prosecutions

Recent prosecutions highlight the cost of failing to provide this evidence. SafeWork NSW and WorkSafe NZ do not just prosecute the "big players"; they target any PCBU where a failure to manage risk is evident.

- **Integrated Agricultural Developments Pty Ltd (2024):** Convicted and fined $180,000 after a quad bike rollover incident involving a labour-hire worker. The charge involved a failure to ensure the health and safety of workers and a failure to coordinate with other duty holders.
- **JBS Australia Pty Ltd (2023):** Fined $300,000 after a worker was struck by falling hay bales. The failure involved inadequate systems for stacking and testing moisture in hay, and a failure to protect workers from falling objects.
- **Pengda Pty Ltd (2025):** Fined $33,000 for failing to notify the regulator of a fall-from-height incident and failing to preserve the site for inspection. This case highlights that post-incident behavior is also subject to strict evidentiary requirements.

Evidence Requirement	Practical "Proof" for Contractors	Regulatory Basis
Consultation	Simple records of "who, what, when, and what decision" regarding a safety matter.	WHS Consultation Code.
Plant Safety	Maintenance logs, pre-start checklists, and records of ROPS/guards being fitted.	Rural Plant Code of Practice.
Competency	Training matrix showing unit standards (e.g., NZQA 20848 for 4WD) and refreshers.	"Safer Seasons" White Paper.
Hazard Management	A hazard register that is updated when conditions change (e.g., weather).	Farm Safety Basics.

Conclusion

For agri-adjacent service providers and contractors, safety management is not an administrative burden but a strategic necessity. The agricultural sector remains one of the most hazardous in both Australia and NZ. The stagnation of these rates over the past two decades suggests that traditional "checkbook safety" is failing to address the underlying risk.

The future of rural safety lies in higher engagement and dynamic systems. This involves:

Bridging the PCBU gap

Moving away from "us and them" toward a collaborative model of shared duties where information flows freely between client and contractor.

Modernising lone worker support

Leveraging GPS and satellite technology to ensure that remote does not mean abandoned.

Rejecting "tick and flick"

Investing in genuine competency and dynamic risk assessment that adapts to the seasons and the unique pressures of the family farm.

Agriculture is your livelihood.

It's ours too

That's why Onside exists - to help rural businesses and contractors who work across multiple properties. By bringing safety and compliance into one digital platform, we help teams reduce paperwork, maintain clear records across sites, and manage shared responsibilities with confidence.

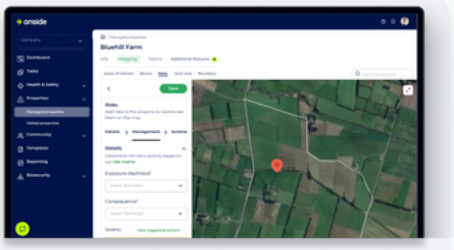
Manage risk with Onside.

An app built for contractors.

Contractors work across multiple properties, each with different risks and shared responsibilities. Onside helps by keeping site knowledge, check-ins, and risk information connected to the property geofence, so teams arrive informed, work with confidence, and leave behind clear, auditable records.

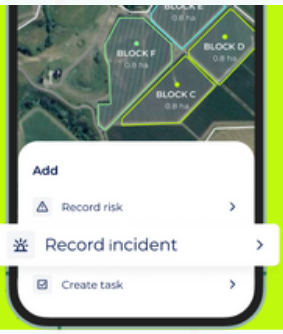
DIGITALLY MAP PROPERTIES & RISKS

Get an up-to-date, digital map of the property. See the hazards and risks your team need to be aware of. Staff can see this map from their mobile app whenever they need.



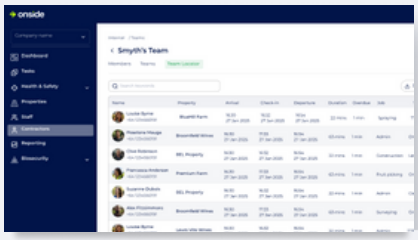
YOUR TEAM CAN REPORT ISSUES

Your team can report any risks or incidents that happen on-site easily via the Onside app, so that the issues can be managed with visibility.



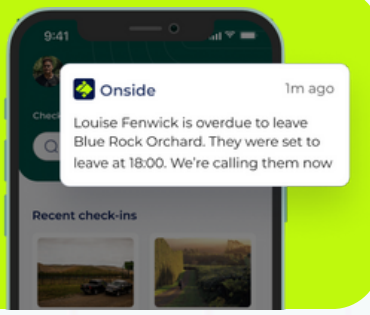
VISIBILITY OF TEAM CHECK-INS

Teams check in to a known, geofenced site, creating a reliable record of who was where, and when.



KNOW YOUR LONE WORKERS ARE SAFE

For your team who work by alone, get notified if someone hasn't departed by their expected time, and hasn't responded to automated safety calls.



Book a demo

To see how it works, scan this code or visit www.getonside.com


Learn more at
getonside.com