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The rural safety handbook 2026

A practical guide to managing operational risk in agriculture

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Trusted by 10,000+ agribusinesses

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Contents

Agriculture is unlike any other industry.

The rewards are real. Early starts. Physical work. Connection to land and community. Feeding people. There is a sense of purpose in this work that is hard to find anywhere else.

But agriculture also carries real risk.

As operations grow, so does complexity. More properties. More contractors. More team members. More moving parts. And with that complexity comes a greater chance that something important gets missed.

We created this handbook to share what good health and safety management looks like in practice. A practical framework for managing risk consistently across properties, contractors, and teams.

That is the challenge Onside was built to solve.

Not compliance for compliance's sake, but the practical challenge of keeping people safe across operations that are constantly changing.

We have drawn on years of working alongside agricultural operations around the world. From large-scale pastoral businesses to complex multi-property enterprises, the challenge is consistent: how do you build a safety system that people actually use, and that continues to work as the operation grows?

The strongest safety outcomes are usually a reflection of operational maturity. Clear systems, strong leadership, consistent enagagement and visibility.

Take what’s useful in this handbook, and apply it to your operation.

And if you want help building a system that scales, we’d love to hear from you.

Ryan Higgs
Co-founder & CEO
Onside

What’s at stake

The numbers are not improving

Agriculture remains one of the most hazardous industries in Australia and New Zealand. The risks are well known: machinery, chemicals, livestock, remote work, vehicles, fatigue, extreme weather, and seasonal pressure that pushes people to work faster than they should.

The numbers behind those risks remain stubbornly high.

13.7

fatalities per 100,000 workers in Australian agriculture in 2024. More than ten times the national average.

Source: Safe Work Australia, 2025

40%

of all workplace fatalities in New Zealand occur in agriculture. 14 farm workers lost their lives in 2024 alone.

Source: WorkSafe New Zealand, 2024

Despite years of awareness campaigns and regulatory focus, the rates remain persistently high. At the same time, enforcement is becoming more aggressive.

Industrial manslaughter legislation now exists across multiple Australian jurisdictions, with penalties that can reach into the tens of millions of dollars alongside potential imprisonment for individuals.

Regulators are no longer focusing only on the largest operators. Any PCBU where risk management failures are evident is in scope.

When things go wrong, the consequences are serious

Most operators understand the physical risks on their properties.
What is often underestimated is the broader operational and commercial impact that follows a serious incident.

A single event can trigger:

- Regulatory investigations
- Operational disruption
- Insurance increases
- Legal costs
- Reputational damage
- Scrutiny from customers, contractors, and stakeholders
- Restrictions on market access

For larger operations, the impact rarely stays isolated to one property.
The operations that respond best to serious incidents are usually not the lucky ones. They are the ones with clear systems, trained teams, strong records, and documented processes already in place.

Where responsibility sits

Health and safety obligations are shared across every level of an operation. In Australia and New Zealand, responsibilities are structured across four roles.

Understanding how those roles interact - particularly when multiple businesses share a property - is critical to meeting your legal obligations.

1. PCBU: PERSON CONDUCTING A BUSINESS OR UNDERTAKING

PCBU is not a role you choose. It is a legal status assigned under health and safety legislation. In agricultural operations, the definition is deliberately broad. It can apply to farm owners, contractors, labour hire businesses, transport providers, and service companies.

If your activities influence the work being carried out, you are likely a PCBU. The PCBU holds the primary duty of care and must ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the health and safety of workers, contractors, visitors, and anyone else affected by the operation.

Key responsibilities include:

- Maintaining safe workplaces, systems, and equipment
- Managing risks continuously
- Providing training and supervision
- Monitoring worker wellbeing and workplace conditions
- Consulting with workers and other PCBUs
- Ensuring safe handling of plant, structures, and substances

Overlapping duties

In most agricultural operations, multiple PCBUs are active at the same time.

When contractors work on your property, responsibilities overlap.
The property owner controls site conditions. The contractor controls how the work is carried out. Both influence safety outcomes. Both hold legal duties.

Those duties cannot be transferred through a contract.

WorkSafe and Safe Work Australia require PCBUs with overlapping duties to consult, cooperate, and coordinate.

In practice, that means:

Consult.
Identify risks together. Agree who controls each risk. Record the outcome.

Cooperate.
Share information openly. Safety decisions should not be undermined by assumptions, time pressure, or poor communication.

Coordinate.
Align activities across the site. Everyone needs visibility of what work is happening nearby, who is responsible, and how conditions may change during the day.

A signed contract does not remove your health and safety duties. Evidence of consultation, cooperation, and coordination does.

2. OFFICERS

Officers are owners, directors, partners, or senior managers who influence how the business operates. Their responsibility is personal and cannot be delegated. They must:

- Stay informed on WHS matters
- Understand operational risks
- Provide adequate safety resources
- Respond to incidents and hazards promptly
- Ensure compliance processes exist
- Verify those processes are followed

3. MANAGERS AND LEADERS

Managers and team leaders are responsible for embedding safety into day-to-day operations. They must:

- Model safe behaviour
- Maintain safety systems and procedures
- Ensure team members can perform tasks safely
- Communicate expectations clearly
- Investigate and report incidents
- Promote a positive safety culture
- Keep safety visible in operational decisions

4. WORKERS

Workers include employees, labour hire team members, and contractors. Workers are responsible for:

- Taking reasonable care of themselves and others
- Following safety procedures
- Using PPE correctly
- Reporting hazards, incidents, and unsafe situations
- Participating in training and safety discussions
- Ensuring work areas are safe before and after work

PCBU responsibilities

Who's responsible for what

PCBU

- Make sure the workplace, equipment, and systems health and safety risk is managed continuously
- Make sure the handling and storage of plant, structures, and substances is safe
- Provide adequate facilities. for the welfare of workers and make sure workers have access to these
- Provide information, training, instructions, or supervision to protect workers and others from risk
- Monitor the health of workers and the conditions at the workplace to prevent illness or injury
- Communicate with workers on issues that affect their health and safety
- Consult, co-operate, and coordinate with other PCBUs when there's a shared work health and safety matter

Officers

- Have up-to-date knowledge of work health and safety matters
- Understand the business operations and any risks involved
- Make sure there are enough resources available to manage risks
- Respond in a timely way to information about incidents or risks
- Have the right processes for complying with the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015
- Make sure these processes referred to above are available and used properly

Managers & team leaders

- Model good health and safety practices
- Implement and maintain a safety management system
- Make sure workers can carry out their responsibilities safely
- Make sure workers understand their health and safety responsibilities
- Report and investigate any notifiable events
- Communicate safety information to stakeholders (e.g contractors, team members)
- Make safety part of all businness decisions and operations
- Promote a positive culture of safety

Workers

- Take reasonable care of their own health and safety
- Take reasonable care not to put the health and safety of others at risk
- Immediately report notifiable incidents, injuries, or illnesses
- Comply with safety management systems
- Use personal protective equipment
- Attend organised safety training
- Participate in safety meetings and discussions
- Report new risks or dangerous situations
- Make sure the work area is safe before starting work and when you leave

Managing risk across your properties

Every agricultural operation carries risk.

The goal is not to eliminate every risk entirely. It is to identify hazards early, assess them properly, apply effective controls, and review them consistently.

For operations managing multiple properties, this process needs to work consistently across every site.

The four-step process

Identify → **Assess** → **Control** → **Review**

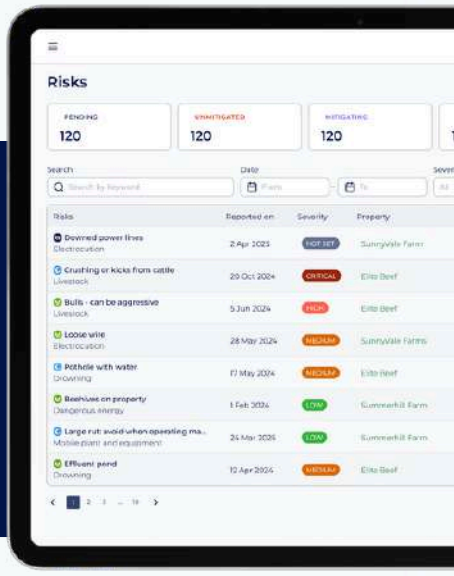
1. Identify

Risk identification should be continuous. Strong operators build hazard reporting into everyday work, not annual paperwork exercises.

To identify risks effectively:

- Walk properties regularly with site managers and team members
- Review previous incidents and near misses
- Encourage immediate hazard reporting
- Make reporting simple for employees, contractors, and visitors

For larger operations, a centralised risk register creates visibility across all properties. When a hazard appears at one site, it can immediately be reviewed across the wider operation.



Digital risk registers

Digital registers make hazards easier to capture, track, and review. When team members can report a hazard from the field as soon as they spot it, reporting improves and records stay current. Onside gives operations managers a live view of hazards across every property.

2. Assess

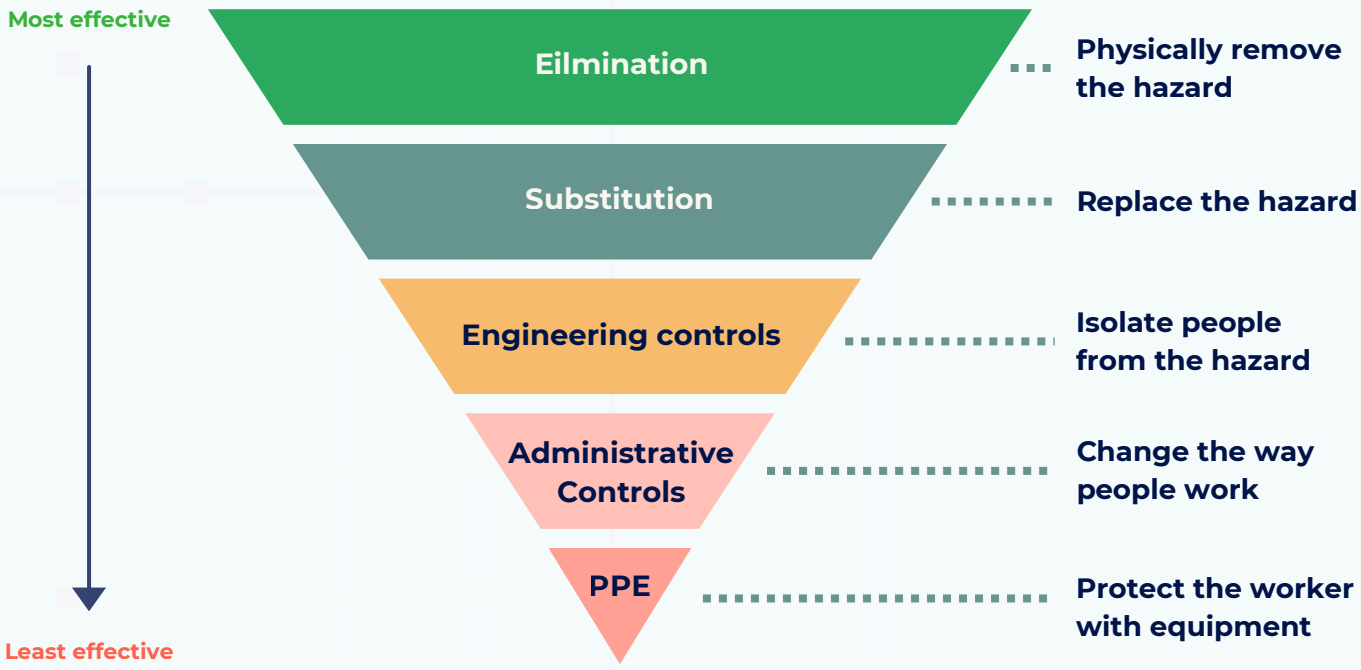
Harm category
How serious could the outcome be? Assess the worst realistic consequence, not just the most likely one.

Likelihood
How likely is the hazard to cause harm? Consider frequency of exposure, environmental conditions, and how work is carried out.

Together, these determine the risk rating and priority level.

3. Control

Controls reduce the likelihood or severity of harm.
The hierarchy of controls ranks approaches from most effective to least effective.



- **Elimination:** Remove the hazard entirely
- **Substitution:** Replace the hazard with something safer
- **Engineering controls:** Isolate people from the hazard
- **Administrative controls:** Change the way work is done
- **PPE:** Protect the worker when exposure cannot otherwise be avoided

Strong safety systems usually combine multiple controls rather than relying on one measure alone.

> *"We use Onside's real-time hazard mapping feature to pinpoint where the guys need to go or areas they need to avoid."*
>
> Gary Hite, Farm Manager
> Van Dairy

4. Review

Controls should be reviewed regularly to confirm they remain effective. Review frequency should reflect the severity of the risk.

Review frequency	Severity of risk
Every 3 months	Risks that could cause fatality or permanent disability
Every 6 months	Risks that could cause time off work
Every 9 months	Risks that could require a doctor's visit
Every 12 months	Risks requiring first aid treatment only

Reviews should also occur when:

- New equipment is introduced
- Work processes change
- Incidents or near misses occur
- New projects begin
- Significant team changes occur

When reviewing risks:

- Involve the people exposed to the hazard
- Ensure reviewers understand the operational context
- Use current industry guidance and codes of practice

Managing your team

Strong safety outcomes rely on well-trained people.
That becomes even more important in operations with seasonal workforces, contractor reliance, or teams working across multiple sites.

The four-step process

Induct → **Assess** → **Train** → **Record**

1. Induct

Every worker should complete an induction before starting work.

- Inductions should cover:
- Emergency procedures
- Incident reporting
- Site-specific hazards
- Safety policies and procedures
- PPE requirements
- Worker responsibilities
- Consultation and communication processes

For multi-site operations, inductions should reflect the specific hazards and conditions of each property.

2. Assess

After induction, assess competency for the tasks the worker will perform. The most effective assessments are practical. Watch the person complete the task safely. Record competency against four levels:

1. Needs training
2. Able to work under supervision
3. Competent
4. Able to train others

This creates a clear record of capability and training needs across the team.

3. Train

Training should directly address identified competency gaps. The most effective training is practical and hands-on.

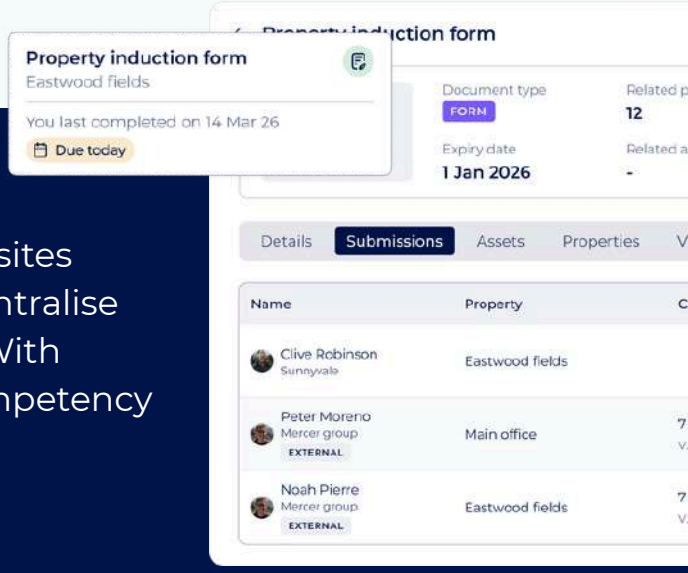
Written materials, demonstrations, photos, and verbal briefings all support learning. Showing someone how to complete a task safely is usually the most effective method.

4. Record

Training records are both an operational and legal requirement.
If an incident occurs, organisations need to demonstrate workers were properly inducted, assessed, and trained.

Records should include:

- Induction sign-offs
- Competency assessments
- Training records
- Licences and certifications
- Expiry and renewal dates



Digital record keeping

Managing records manually across multiple sites becomes difficult quickly. Digital systems centralise records, reduce admin, and simplify audits. With Onside, training records, inductions, and competency data are stored in one accessible system.

Managing contractors and visitors

Contractors and visitors create one of the biggest coordination challenges in agriculture.

Unlike permanent team members, contractors arrive with their own equipment, processes, and risk exposure. From the moment they arrive on site, your duty of care applies.

The four-step process

Induct → **Assess** → **Train** → **Record**

1. Selecting contractors

Contractor selection should consider safety as carefully as capability and cost.

For lower-risk work, request:

- Health and safety policy
- Evidence of training and competency
- Public liability insurance
- Details of risks they may introduce

For higher-risk work, also request:

- Site Specific Safety Plans (SSSPs) or Safe Work Method Statements (SWMS)
- Evidence of specialist competency

Keep records of all documentation received. For larger operations, a centralised contractor register prevents repeated verification across sites.

2. Inducting contractors

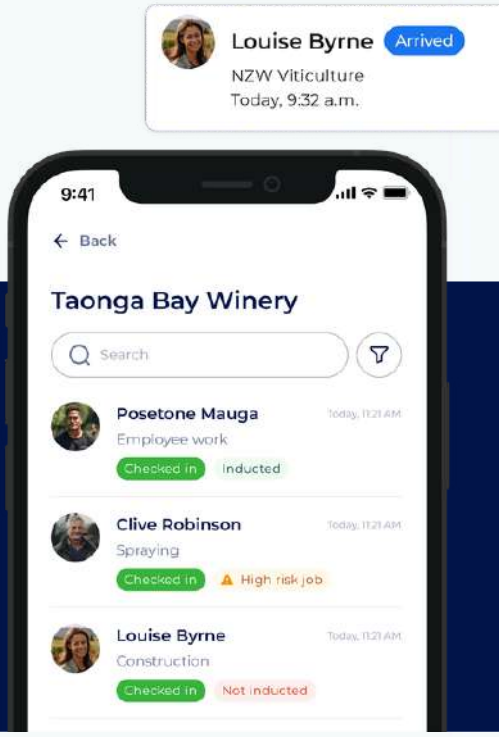
Contractor management is a two-way process.

You need to understand the risks contractors bring onto the property. Contractors need to understand the hazards already present.

Contractor inductions should cover:

- Site hazards and controls
- Emergency procedures
- Access restrictions
- Traffic management
- Communication requirements
- Environmental risks
- Reporting obligations

Maintain records of all contractor inductions.



Visitor and contractor management

For multi-property operations, visibility matters. Pre-arrival digital inductions improve consistency and reduce delays at site entry. Onside gives managers real-time visibility of who is on site, where they are working, and which inductions they have completed.

> *"The value with Onside is knowing where all the contractors are across our different farms."*
>
> **Matt Corbett, Cellar Master**
> Greystone Wines

3. Monitoring contractors

Your responsibility does not end once a contractor is inducted.
Maintain regular communication and monitor work practices while work is underway.

If unsafe work is identified:

- Discuss the issue directly
- Agree on corrective action
- Monitor implementation
- Record the outcome if required

If the risk is serious, stop work until the issue is resolved.

4. Evaluating contractors

Review contractor performance at the completion of a job or season.

Evaluation criteria should include:

- Safety performance
- Quality of work
- Communication
- Timeframes
- Overall reliability

Over time, this builds a safer and more reliable contractor network.

When things go wrong

Even strong operations experience incidents.

What matters is how prepared the business is to respond, investigate, and improve.

Being prepared

Every property should have:

- Accessible first aid kits
- Clearly positioned fire extinguishers
- Trained first aiders whenever work is underway
- Emergency contact lists
- A designated helicopter landing area

Emergency contact information should be easy to access and easy to communicate to emergency services. The Red Cross First Aid app provides offline emergency guidance and is recommended for all team members.

Australia: 000

New Zealand: 111

Responding to an incident

When an incident occurs:

1. **Ensure safety first**
   Check for immediate danger before approaching.

2. **Provide assistance**
   Call emergency services if required and administer first aid where appropriate.

3. **Secure the area**
   Prevent further injury and preserve the scene.

4. **Document the incident**
   Record time, location, event details, witness information, and photos where appropriate.

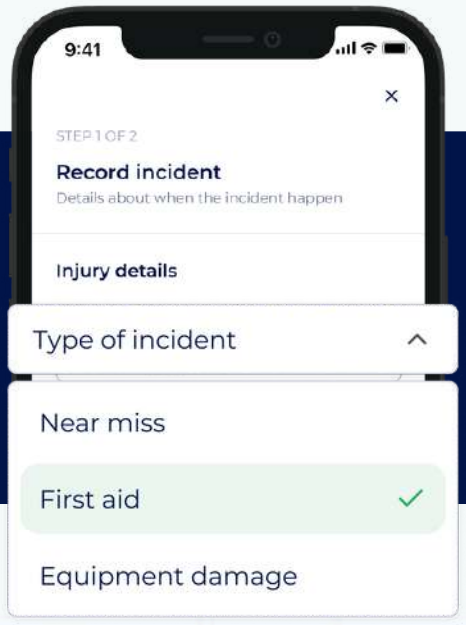
5. **Report and follow up**
   Notify management promptly and ensure the injured person receives appropriate care.

Recording incidents

All incidents, near misses, and unsafe behaviours should be recorded. Near misses are especially valuable because they identify serious risks before harm occurs.

Digital incident reporting

Team members can log incidents directly from the field, with photos, locations, and timestamps automatically captured. This improves response times and creates a stronger audit trail.



Notifiable incidents

Some incidents must be reported to the relevant regulator immediately. These include:

- Fatalities
- Serious injuries or illnesses
- Dangerous incidents exposing people to serious risk

This applies even if nobody was ultimately harmed. Notification is required as soon as possible. In most jurisdictions this means within 24 hours of becoming aware of the incident.

When a notifiable incident occurs, the site must remain undisturbed until regulatory clearance is provided. Failing to preserve the scene is itself a prosecutable offence.

Contact your relevant regulatory body:

- New Zealand - WorkSafe
- Victoria - WorkSafe Victoria
- New South Wales - SafeWork NSW
- Queensland - Workplace Health and Safety Queensland
- ACT - WorkSafe ACT
- South Australia - SafeWork SA
- Northern Territory - NT WorkSafe
- Western Australia - WorkSafe WA
- Tasmania - WorkSafe Tasmania

Investigating incidents

Investigations should match the severity of the incident. The goal is to identify root causes, not just immediate causes.

Regulators will focus on whether:

- The risk was identified
- Controls were in place and appropriate
- Workers were competent
- Evidence of consultation, cooperation, and coordination existed

Review whether contributing hazards already existed on the risk register:

- **If yes**, strengthen controls
- **If no**, add the hazard and establish controls

Severity	Investigation level
Fatality or permanent disability (actual or near-miss)	Full investigation
Time off work or doctors visit (actual or near-miss)	Investigation
First aid (actual or near-miss)	No formal investigation required

Emergency planning

Every property should maintain documented emergency plans.

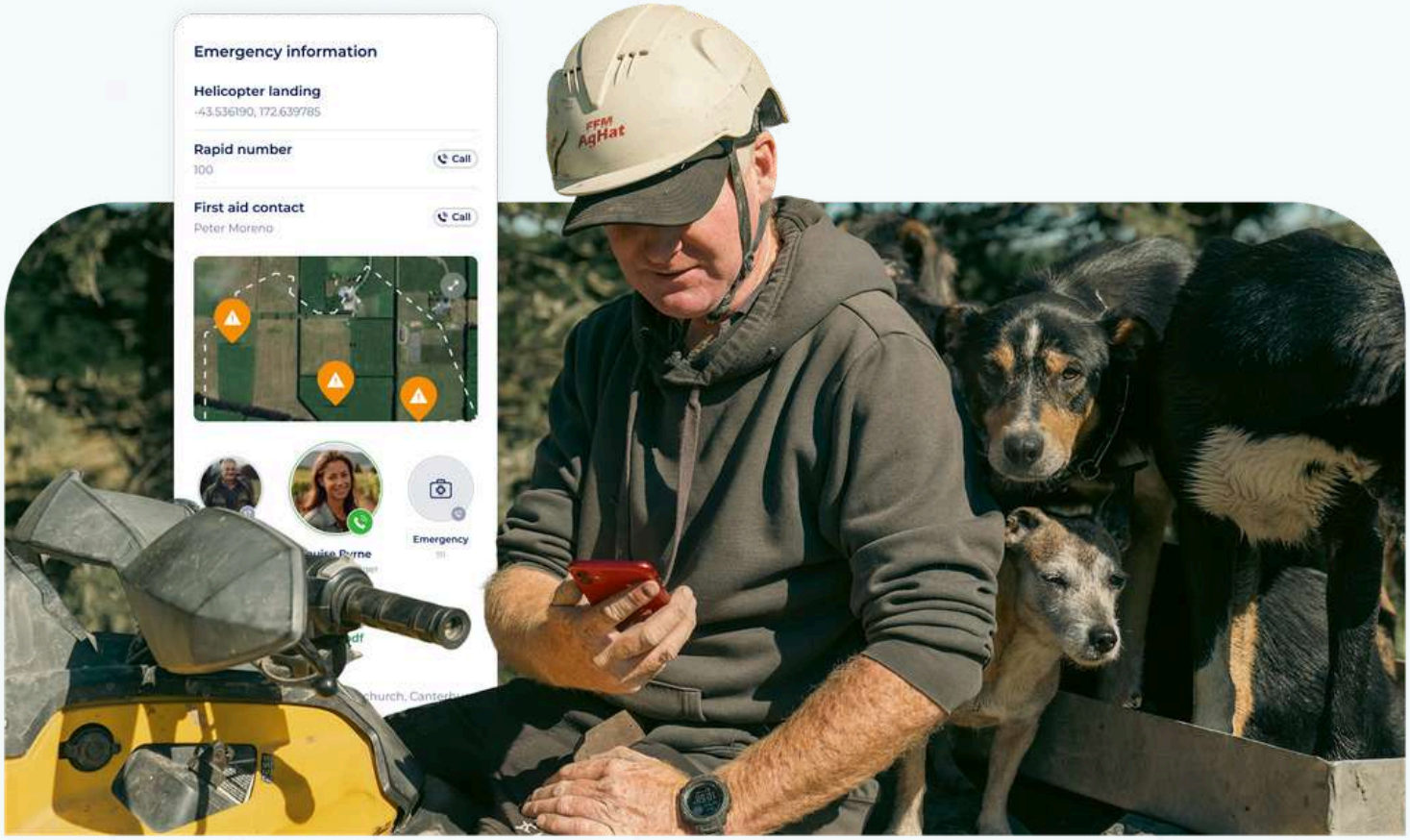
Plans should cover likely scenarios including:

- Medical emergencies
- Fire
- Chemical spills
- Vehicle and machinery incidents
- Electrocution
- Natural disasters
- Drowning

Each plan should clearly define:

- Required actions
- Responsible personnel
- Review dates
- Testing schedules

Practice emergency responses regularly.
Short, practical toolbox exercises are often the most effective.



Building a system that scales

Health and safety becomes more difficult as operations grow.
What works in a single-site operation often breaks down across multiple properties, larger workforces, and rotating contractors.

The challenge is not commitment.

It is consistency. And consistency depends on adoption.

Culture is the foundation

Systems matter.

But culture determines whether those systems are followed.

Strong safety cultures are built when:

- Leaders model safe behaviour
- Team members feel comfortable reporting issues
- Safety is embedded into operational decisions
- Incidents are treated as opportunities to improve

Culture is built through consistent behaviour over time.

Make it systematic

Safety systems should not rely on memory or individual effort.

The foundations of a scalable safety system include:

- A centralised risk register
- Clear procedures for high-risk work
- Consistent inductions
- Simple incident reporting processes
- Regular toolbox talks and safety meetings

For growing operations, consistency across sites is critical.

Audit readiness

Audits, certifications, and insurance reviews all require evidence.
Strong operations maintain records continuously rather than scrambling before an audit.

That includes:

- Current risk registers
- Up-to-date training records
- Documented incident investigations
- Tested emergency plans
- Evidence of regulatory reporting where required

Operations rarely fail audits because they do not care about safety.
They fail because they cannot prove what they are doing.

The adoption challenge

A safety system only works if the team on the ground uses it.
This is one of the biggest challenges in agricultural safety technology.

Operations invest in systems that are never fully adopted. Risk registers fall behind. Records stop being updated. Check-in tools are bypassed because they are too difficult to use in the field.

A system designed for an office environment rarely works in a remote paddock.

A system that depends on mobile reception fails when connectivity drops.

A system built around generic construction workflows often misses how agricultural operations actually function.

The gap between having a safety system and having a safety system that works is usually an adoption gap.

Reliable adoption creates reliable data. Reliable data creates operational visibility. Operational visibility enables governance.

The systems that achieve strong adoption are designed for where the work actually happens:

- Offline capability in low-connectivity areas
- Map-based interfaces that reflect rural properties
- Geospatial automation linking risks, tasks, and check-ins to specific locations
- Contractor networks that simplify inductions and site briefings before arrival

Digital tools as the enabler

Paper systems and spreadsheets become difficult to manage at scale. Digital systems improve consistency by reducing friction.

When team members can report hazards from the field, complete inductions before arrival, and access records centrally, safety processes become easier to maintain consistently across every property.

For larger operations, digital systems also create operational visibility:

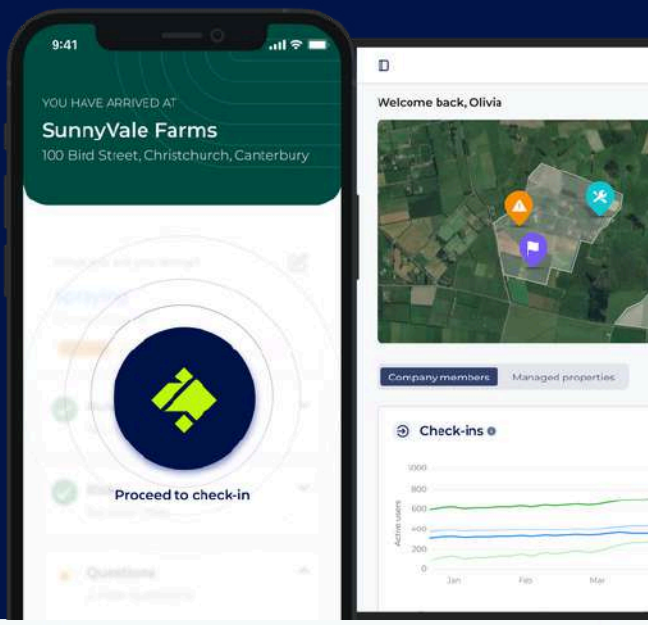
- Which contractors are on site
- Which hazards are active and where
- Where incidents are occurring
- Which certifications are expiring

That visibility supports both operations and governance.

Onside: Built for agribusiness

Onside is the connected risk platform purpose-built for agriculture. It combines health and safety, contractor management, and biosecurity into one system built for the way agricultural teams actually work. Offline capable. Map-based. Designed for adoption across properties, contractors, and seasonal teams.

More than **23,000** properties around the world use Onside to manage risk every day.



Continuous improvement

Strong safety systems evolve over time.

Continuous improvement comes from:

- Reviewing risks regularly
- Analysing incidents and near misses
- Gathering feedback from teams
- Keeping pace with industry guidance and regulation

The strongest operations treat incidents, audits, and near misses as information, then use that information to improve the system.

Final note

Safety in agriculture is not a one-time exercise.
It is an ongoing commitment to the people working on your properties, the contractors supporting your operation, and the communities connected to your business.

The frameworks in this handbook provide a foundation.
What matters most is applying them consistently.

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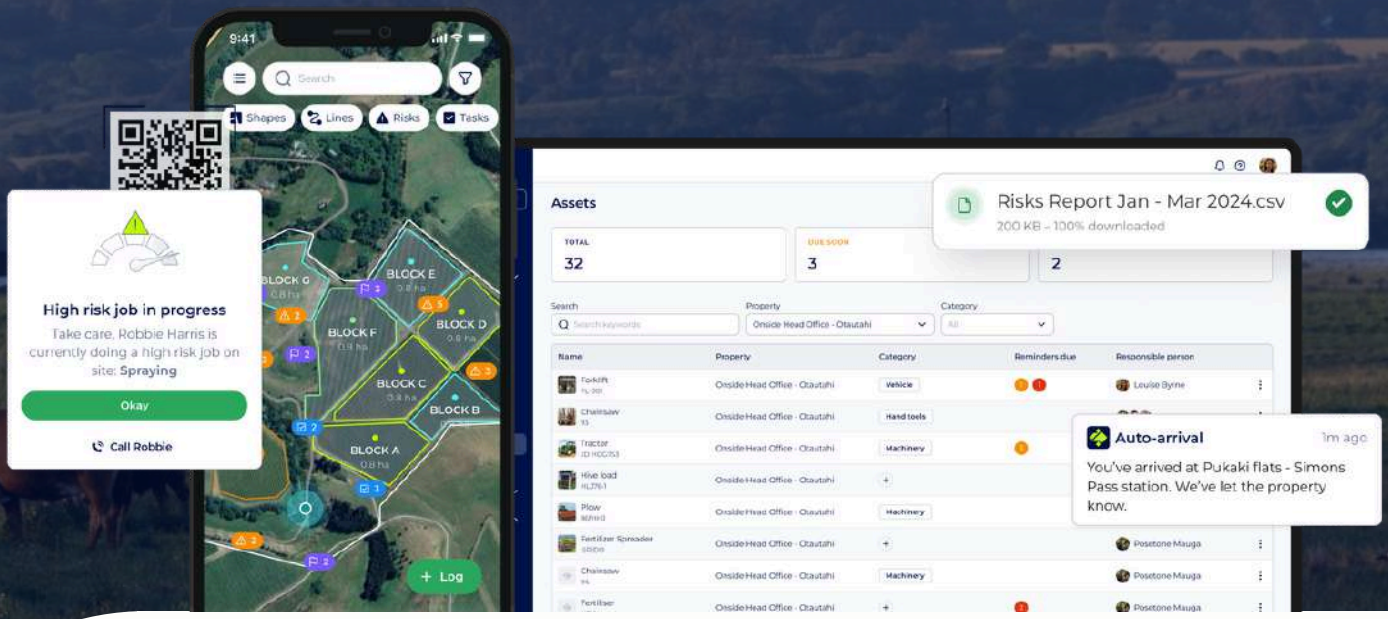
Rural health and safety software

built for the complexity of agribusiness



LIVE SAFETY UPDATES

Communicate hazards instantly across properties and ensure team members and contractors acknowledge critical safety information.

TASK MANAGEMENT

Assign actions, track progress, and maintain a clear record of follow-up activities.

LOG INCIDENTS EASILY

Capture incidents from the field with photos, locations, timestamps, and corrective actions.

INSTANT REPORTING

Generate reports for audits, certifications, and internal reviews without manual admin.

Go to Onside

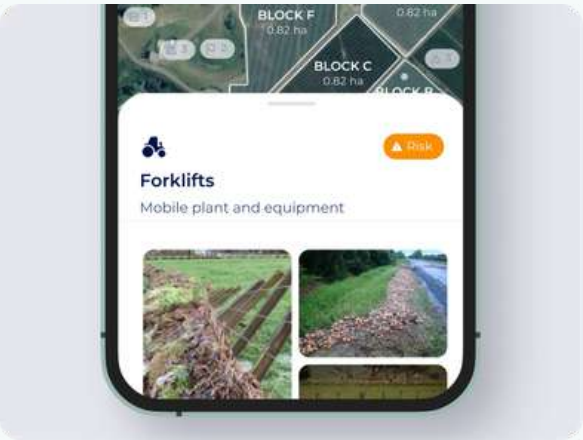
Manage safety, biosecurity, and contractors in one platform

Onside helps agribusinesses reduce risk, simplify compliance, and gain real-time visibility across people, properties, and operations.

Health & Safety

Real-time risk management for safer operations.

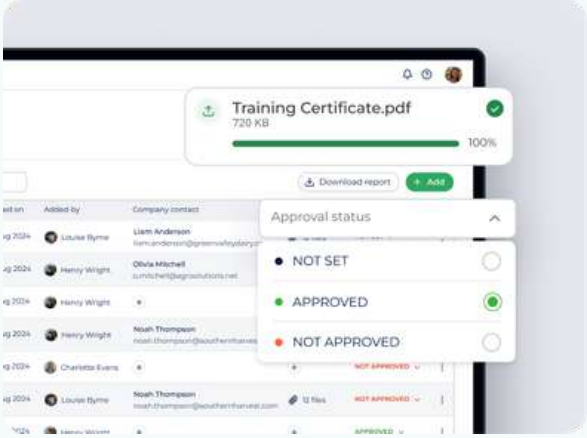
- Know the risks, and keep them current and shared with everyone.
- Get notified of incidents, and respond quickly.
- Use advanced analytics for reporting and preventative actions.



Contractor management

Streamlined onboarding and compliance.

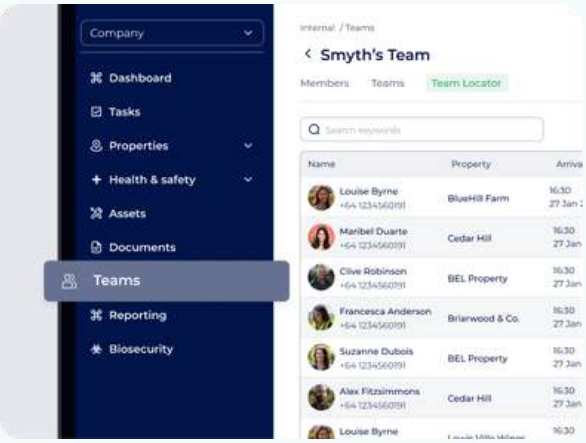
- Ensure every contractor is compliant before arrival
- Maintain real-time visibility and control on-site



Lone worker safety

Visibility when it matters most.

- Maintain real-time visibility of workers and their status
- Trigger rapid alerts and response when something goes wrong



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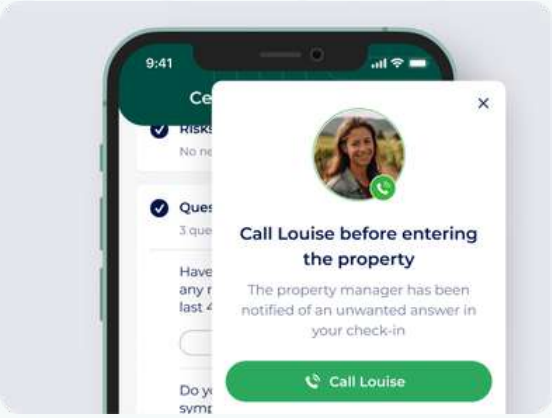
Biosecurity

Reduce biosecurity risk and respond faster.

- Control and screen all visitor entries to prevent risk
- Track movements and respond quickly to biosecurity issues



Visitor management

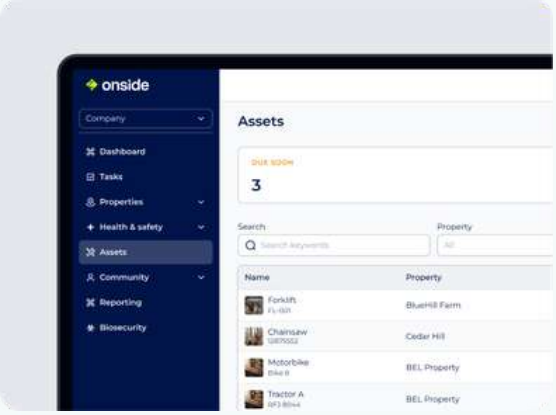
Know who's on-site at all times.

- Gather all visitor details, quickly and digitally
- Gather visitor insights across your operation for reporting and compliance

Asset management

Keep assets safe, compliant, and operational

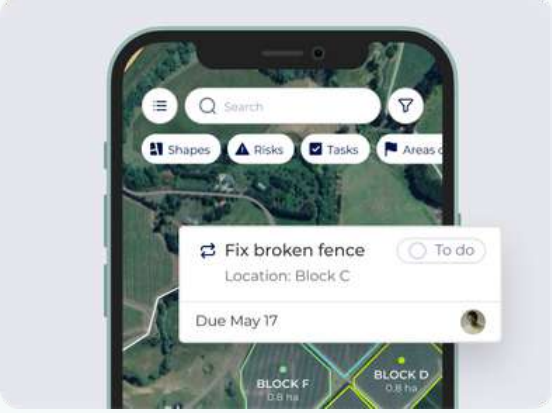
- Maintain a digital register of all assets across locations and teams
- Track maintenance and compliance to prevent downtime



Farm operations

Connect maps, tasks, and compliance.

- Keep tasks, teams, and locations clearly organised
- Standardise workflows with SOPs, checklists, and templates



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