

Jenny's Story and a Lesson in Side-by-Side Safety

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Jenny and Craig run a dairy farm on undulating country which, like many properties along Australia's east coast this year, has experienced an exceptionally wet season. It was an early winter afternoon when Jenny was bringing the cows home, following behind the herd in the side-by-side vehicle. With the tracks soaked from recent rain, she was anxious about getting bogged. It had already happened once that month, and she was dreading the thought of going back for the tractor yet again.

As she navigated a familiar bend at the end of a paddock, her focus was on a section of track near an embankment leading down to the creek. Normally, the area was wide enough to be safe, but this time the ground conditions had changed. As Jenny turned the corner, the side-by-side suddenly sank into soft earth. She instinctively hit the accelerator to power through, but the burst of speed pushed the vehicle dangerously close to the slope.

In a split second, the front tyre hit a rut and jolted the vehicle. Jenny tried to steer out of it, but the momentum was too much — the side-by-side lost traction and slid sideways down the embankment. Jenny felt a wave of panic rise as the vehicle slid and she had no control. Panic surged. "I remember thinking 'no, no, no, this can't be happening,'" she later recalled. "I was just holding on, I really thought it was going to tip."

Fortunately, the vehicle came to a sudden stop partway down the slope when its side, just behind the driver's seat, collided with a tree, preventing a full rollover. However, Jenny wasn't wearing a seatbelt or helmet. On impact, she was thrown sideways, striking her head against the side roll-over protection bar. She sustained a concussion and a deep gash that required stitches, leaving her incapacitated for several days.

This near-miss is a sobering reminder of how quickly things can go wrong — even on familiar tracks, and at low speeds.

The Safer Alternative?

Since October 2021, changes to Australian laws have required all new quad bikes sold to meet minimum stability standards and be fitted with an Operator Protection Device (OPD). This led many farmers to shift to using side-by-side vehicles (SSVs), which were widely viewed as a safer alternative for day-to-day tasks.

However, in 2024, 14 people were killed on farms while using side-by-side vehicles—up from just four the previous year. For the first time in Australian farm safety reporting, side-by-sides overtook both tractors and quad bikes as the leading cause of on-farm fatalities in a single year.¹

The sharp increase in fatalities is concerning. While no single explanation exists, several factors may be contributing:

- **Familiarity breeds complacency:** Because side-by-sides are used regularly for everyday tasks, operators can become overly comfortable and begin to underestimate the risks involved.
- **False sense of security:** Cabs, seatbelts, and roll bars can create the illusion of complete safety, which can result in neglecting essential precautions like buckling up, wearing helmets, or adjusting driving to the conditions.
- **Speed and terrain are underestimated:** Despite their sturdy appearance, side-by-sides have a high centre of gravity. This, combined with speed and uneven or sloped terrain, makes them prone to rollovers—similar to quad bikes.
- **Task-focused mindset:** In the rush to get jobs done, safety procedures are often overlooked in favour of speed and convenience.

- **Lack of training or reminders:** Just like quad bikes, operating SSV's safely requires formal training and regular safety refreshers. Without them, important safety messages fade over time.

The widespread belief that side-by-sides are "safe" can create a false sense of confidence, encouraging risky behaviours—such as not wearing seat belts or helmets, or even disabling safety features. When these vehicles become part of the daily routine, it's easy to forget the danger they pose but this is often when accidents happen.

Helmets and seatbelts save lives

Side-by-sides do offer more protection than quad bikes, thanks to their roll cages and enclosed cabs, but this protection is only effective when used properly. The roll cage does little to prevent injury if you're not wearing a seatbelt. Without it, you risk being thrown from the vehicle, crushed beneath it, or tossed violently inside the cab during a rollover.

Seatbelts help keep the operator within the vehicle's protective zone and significantly reduce the likelihood of serious or fatal injuries. Wearing one is not just recommended—it's part of the state of knowledge around known risks and controls. Manufacturers clearly state in manuals and on warning labels that seatbelts must be worn when operating an SSV. Ignoring this guidance not only increases risk—it may also expose you to legal liability if something goes wrong.²

Implementing Effective Control Measures

As the owner or manager of a dairy business, you have a legal responsibility under work health and safety laws to identify and manage risks associated with using side-by-side vehicles on your property. This includes taking all reasonably practicable steps to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of your employees, contractors, visitors and yourself.

To manage the risks associated with using SSV's, it's essential to implement effective control measures. These are often a combination of actions that, together, improve safety. Examples include, but are not limited to:³

- Select the right vehicle for the task and the terrain.
- Provide training and information to all operators, including family members and employees, so the SSV is used competently and according to manufacturer instructions.
- Enforce the use of seatbelts for both drivers and passengers at all times.
- Require helmets for all occupants to minimise head injury in the event of an accident.
- Ensure doors or cab nets are closed to keep limbs and bodies within the protective rollover zone.
- Use only approved attachments, as recommended by the manufacturer.
- Develop and follow safe operating procedures, which are often provided by the manufacturer.
- Secure the vehicle when not in use, including removing and storing the key out of reach of children.
- Regularly maintain the vehicle and ensure it's used in line with manufacturer guidelines.
- Prohibit children under 16 from operating the vehicle under any circumstances.
- Never exceed load limits, as this compromises handling and stability.

- Never carry passengers in the rear cargo tray, which is not designed to safely transport people.

These control measures should be reviewed regularly. If they're not effective, they must be revised to ensure they adequately manage the risks.

A Wake-Up Call

Jenny's near-miss was caused by a combination of wet weather, challenging terrain, and misjudged expectations about how the vehicle would respond. Had she been wearing her seatbelt and helmet, she would still have been shaken—but likely would have avoided the head injuries that left her sidelined for days.

Recognising the seriousness of what happened, Jenny acted immediately. She introduced new safety rules for when using the side-by-side: seatbelts are now mandatory, and all operators and passengers must wear a properly fitted helmet.

Her story serves as a powerful reminder that no vehicle is risk-free—and that simple precautions can make the difference between a close call and a tragedy. ■ ■

More Information



Side-by-side vehicle safety –
[Worksafe Victoria](#)



Side-by-side vehicles fact sheet –
[SafeWork NSW](#)



1. [FarmSafe Australia 2025. Safer Farms 2025 / Agricultural Injury and Fatality - Trend Report. PDF Document.](#)



2. [Worksafe Victoria Safety Alert 2021. Side-by-side farm vehicles: Don't ignore the seatbelts. Accessed 04 August 2025.](#)



3. [Safework NSW 2024. Agriculture. Side-by-side vehicles. Accessed 05 August 2025](#)



[WorkSafe QLD 2024. Safety Alert. Accessed 05 August 2025](#)