

## NEAR MISS

# A fencing job that changed everything

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**It is often the ordinary jobs that feel the most familiar. These are the ones you have done before and do not seem especially high risk: moving fence posts; repairing a boundary fence. There is always the drive to get through the work before the day runs out.**

For Brett, that was exactly how this day began.

Brett and his employer, Jason, had been replacing a boundary fence on the far side of the property, a couple of kilometres from the dairy and cattle yards. It was physically demanding work and they had already been at it for a couple of days.

By mid-afternoon, Brett had taken the tractor back to a stockpile of fence posts to load the carry-all and transport more posts to where they were working. The posts were solid, heavy timber posts that had been cut on the farm some time earlier from a tree brought down in a storm.

Working alone, Brett was using a winch to pull the posts onto the carry-all. It was hard, physical work. He had already moved several posts and was preparing the next one when everything went wrong.

As Brett bent down to pull a post forward and attach the winch wire, the posts stacked behind it shifted and rolled. He tried to move back, but stumbled into the carry-all. Before he could recover, the weight of the rolling posts came forward and trapped his leg.

Alone and in extreme pain, Brett believes he blacked out for a time. Somehow, he managed to call Jason for help, but it was still some time before Jason got to him.

When emergency crews arrived, they were faced with a complex and confronting rescue. Brett's leg had been badly crushed beneath the posts, which had to be moved carefully to free him. A large emergency response was required as crews worked to stabilise him and do everything they could to save his leg as they freed him.

Brett had suffered multiple fractures to his lower leg. He also required a

fasciotomy to relieve pressure building up in the muscles around the injury.

Recovery was long and difficult. Months of rehabilitation followed, along with the physical and mental challenge of adjusting after such a traumatic incident. For six weeks, Brett was unable to bear weight on the injured leg.

Brett's story is a confronting reminder of how quickly routine farm work can become a medical emergency. There was no dramatic machinery failure, no unusual weather event, no high-speed incident — just a physically demanding task, heavy materials, a moment of movement in the load, and no chance to recover once things started to go wrong.

That is often how serious injuries happen on farm. Not in the jobs that look dangerous from a distance, but in the everyday work that can quietly carry significant risk.

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## Lessons from Brett's story

This incident highlights several important farm safety lessons.

Heavy materials such as timber posts, rails, pipes and logs can be unpredictable when stacked, moved or pulled. Even when they appear stable, they can shift, roll or slide suddenly, especially when one piece is removed or tension is applied. Loads do not need to be lifted high or moved fast to cause catastrophic injury.

Working alone increases the risk. When something goes wrong in an isolated paddock or on the far side of a property, response time matters. Even where help is available, distance, terrain and communication delays can all affect how quickly assistance can arrive. In a crush injury, those lost minutes can make a major difference.

Fatigue and physical strain are also worth considering. After a couple of long days of hard fencing work, tiredness can affect judgement, footing, body position and reaction time. Jobs involving repeated lifting, dragging, pulling and awkward postures deserve proper planning, especially later in the day when workers are more likely to be fatigued.

There are practical steps farms can take to reduce the risk of this type of incident:

- Assess how heavy or unstable materials will be moved before starting the task
- Avoid positioning yourself in the path of rolling, shifting or falling materials
- Use mechanical handling methods that keep people clear of the load wherever possible
- Review how posts or similar materials are stacked so they are less likely to move unexpectedly
- Avoid doing high-risk loading work alone in isolated areas
- Make sure there is a reliable way to communicate and call for help
- Consider whether the job should be broken into smaller, safer steps rather than pushed through quickly
- Stop and reassess when a task becomes awkward, tiring or harder than expected.

Most importantly, this story is a reminder not to underestimate familiar jobs. Just because a task is common, does not mean it is low risk. On farms, many serious injuries happen during maintenance, repairs and material handling – the very jobs people often see as part of a normal day's work.

A routine task can become life-changing in seconds. That is why taking the time to think through the risks beforehand is never wasted.

### The hidden toll of a farm incident

When a serious incident happens on farm, the impact is rarely limited to the person who is injured. For Jason, there was the shock of finding Brett trapped, the stress of the emergency response, and the emotional weight of seeing someone badly hurt while simply doing a day's work.

In the aftermath, there was also the disruption to the farm business, the pressure of dealing with a workplace investigation, and the lasting effect that an event like this can have on confidence, decision-making and peace of mind.

Serious incidents leave a mark on everyone involved. ■ ■

