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Farmers warned of silent but potentially deadly risk

SA Power Networks is reminding farmers planning to take advantage of season-opening rains of the deadly threat posed by power lines on their properties.

“The recent deaths of two farmers in Queensland in March and April are a tragic reminder of the very real danger posed by power lines on farms,” said Paul Roberts, Manager Stakeholder Relations for SA Power Networks.

A range of power lines cross South Australian farms, including transmission lines over 132,000 Volts and mounted on steel-framed towers, and sub-transmission lines at 66,000 Volts and 33,000 Volts, which are strung between taller Stobie poles and link SA Power Networks’ substations.

Then there are Single Wire Earth Return, or SWER lines, which carry 19,000 volts and constitute about 30% of the SA electricity distribution network. These SWER lines are difficult to see as they are thin, single lines strung tightly between poles that can be hundreds of metres apart.

“We often respond to outages that have been caused by activity on farms during intense work periods such as planting or harvesting,” Mr Roberts said. “It is fortunate, and a matter of luck, that we have not had any recent deaths in South Australia. We have, however, had some serious injuries and several very lucky escapes.

“Incidents occur in all types of situations from people operating tip trucks, augers, headers, excavators, elevating work platforms, scissor lifts and spray booms, to assembling of irrigation pipes and even scaffolding. A new issue that has emerged in recent years is the use of GPS for guiding ever-larger farm machinery.”

Mr Roberts said the two fatalities in Queensland involved boom sprays contacting power lines and illustrated the threat posed by operating tall or wide machinery around power lines. But this hazard can be reduced through proper risk assessment.

“Farm workers should always carry out a safety check before starting a task. Will the work happen near overhead electricity power lines or require movement of tall or wide equipment under or around lines? Is there an alternative? If not, what measures need to be put in place to ensure the work can be done safely?

“While you may have checked the location of lines a year ago, things may have changed, so it’s important to re-familiarise yourself with the location of electricity infrastructure and the heights of lines where you will be moving equipment or working,” Mr Roberts said.

“Most importantly, others working on the property need to be reminded of the location of power lines and that, in extreme heat or windy conditions, power lines may sag or sway, so you need to stay on your toes to ensure you maintain safe clearances while working.”

Mr Roberts said some precautions were simple.

“Never raise truck trays or boom sprays underneath power lines and store all bulk deliveries well away from power lines. Try to avoid using or moving tall machinery near power lines and make sure all workers on your farm know where electricity infrastructure is located and the relevant safe clearances.

“Take extra care when moving equipment or loads, or working near overhead power lines. You need to be aware of the voltage of the line and the appropriate safe distances for working near those lines. The higher the voltages, the greater the clearances required to stay safe.”

Safety tips

On the land, there are a number of practical things you can do to minimise the risks.

- Make it a habit to always check for power lines whenever you move or use farm machinery like grain augers and harvesters, or when moving long or tall loads such as irrigation pipes.
- Access to sheds, haystacks and silos should be located away from power lines to minimise the risk of injury.
- Regularly remind everyone who lives or works on your farm of the location of power lines.
- If you are using GPS-guided equipment, make sure the location of electricity infrastructure on your property is programmed into the system.
- Water is a conductor of electricity so be careful when using water irrigation or water jets near powerlines.
- If you're crop dusting, make sure you (or your contractor) identify where the power lines are located before commencing the job.

What to do if you contact a power line

When an object or vehicle comes into contact with power lines there is a high risk of electric shock. If this happens, you should immediately contact SA Power Networks on 13 13 66 and (preferably) do not move until the power is switched off.

If a vehicle strikes a power line and it is necessary to evacuate the vehicle to prevent injury, several steps must be followed to maximise your safety, including:

- Jump out and clear of the vehicle, ensuring you do not touch the vehicle and the ground at the same time.
- Calmly walk away using small steps.
- Call SA Power Networks immediately on 13 13 66.
- Do not return to the vehicle and keep other people well clear until after the area has been made safe.

In a power emergency call 13 13 66. For an ambulance or police assistance, call 000.