

Fatigue in the field: How Verification Services manages fatigue risk

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There's no arguing that working shifts puts us at a high risk of fatigue! That's because shift workers often need to work at a time when their body clock says they should sleep, and need to sleep when their body clock is geared to being awake and active. In fact, research has found that shift workers have 1-2 hours less sleep on average per 24 hours than non-shift workers.

Safety and Wellbeing sits down with Brendan Vale to discuss how Verification Services (VS) manages fatigue risk.

VS has a large number of shift workers in freezing works establishments and live animal export work. During the 2014/2015 season, frontline staff identified that operators were extending the length of shifts as well as working on weekends. Brendan tells us that MPI people were feeling the strain.

"We realised that we had a responsibility to act on this – fatigue is recognised as one of our strategic health and safety risks. We needed to involve our people in thinking about how to identify, measure and manage the risks associated with fatigue in the workplace."

The VS team developed some key principles to manage the risks of fatigue in consultation with frontline staff and their union. "We asked for frontline representatives from a range of work areas to come together with managers and work through the challenges presented by fatigue."

As part of the process VS used the FAID tool, a bio-mathematical model which aims to predict the likelihood of fatigue, to assist in assessing and managing their fatigue risks.

"The key benefit of FAID modelling is that it predicts the likely fatigue effects of proposed rosters so a range of options can be considered and the best chosen. FAID tolerance levels can be adjusted and in safety critical situations it may be appropriate to reduce the acceptable level of Fatigue risk." says Brendan.

Fiona Johnston from Shiftwork Services was brought in to help the VS team develop a holistic approach to fatigue management.

During development it became apparent that the fatigue management system had the potential to be applied more broadly across MPI and so the Safety and Wellbeing team worked with the VS working group to develop the MPI Fatigue Risk Management System (FRMS). The FRMS includes a range of elements including policies and procedures, FAID diagnostic tool, risk/hazard analysis, training, supporting resources, reporting, incident investigation and internal auditing.

VS also developed the idea of 'communities of practice' where those working in teams could look out for each other and assist colleagues with a high risk of fatigue.

"This has been a great way for us to work together and for each of us to consider the wellbeing of the community as well as ourselves as individuals.

"There have certainly been situations where people have been able to manage fatigue risk by helping colleagues out when extended weekend hours pushes people into a high fatigue risk situation," says Brendan.