

SUBJECT: Wife of a Sheep Rancher was Fatally Injured While
Attempting to Round Up a Flock of Sheep

FACE Investigation 90CO024

Introduction:

The Colorado Department of Health in co-operation with The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Division of Safety Research, performs Fatal Accident Circumstances and Epidemiology (FACE) investigations when a report of an occupational fatality is received. The goal of these evaluations is to prevent fatal work injuries in the future by study of: the working environment, the worker, the task the worker was performing, the tools the worker was using, and the role of management in controlling how these factors interact.

On April 30, 1990, the 58-year-old wife of a sheep rancher was fatally injured while attempting to round up a flock of sheep.

Contacts/Activities:

Under the terms of a cooperative agreement, the Workmen's Compensation Division of the Colorado Department of Labor notified the Colorado Department of Health of a work-related fatality. An investigation was initiated. CDH met with the the family, obtained the investigation report from the county sheriff, and obtained the coroner's report.

Overview of Employers Safety Program:

The family has been in the sheep ranching business for thirty years. The business is a family run operation with no other employees.

The operation being performed was a normal activity for the business and the victim.

Synopsis of Events:

The fatal accident occurred sometime during the night hours on a Friday evening or early Saturday morning. At 1500 hours the victim and her husband left the ranch headquarters to round up their sheep and bring them to the ranch buildings for protection. A major snow storm was developing in the area which is at an elevation of 10,000 feet.

The victim separated from her husband to chase down a second flock of sheep. Very shortly a high wind arose and created white-out conditions in the area. The husband was unable to locate the victim and returned to the ranch to obtain additional help from his son. As darkness set in, the son was sent to town to call for help. The sheriff's department took the call at 2200 hours and notified the local volunteer fire department, the emergency medical service, and search and rescue units from two counties.

The search continued until 0300 hours when it was decided to wait for daylight. At 0745 hours the victim was found.

Cause of Death:

The cause of death was determined by autopsy to be cardio-respiratory arrest secondary to hypothermia.

Recommendations/Discussions:

Recommendation #1: Multiple layers of clothing should be worn when going out into severe cold weather.

Discussion: In this instance, the victim was wearing tennis shoes, blue jeans, a sweater, a jacket and gloves.

Recommendation #2: A compass should be carried when working in open country during storm conditions.

Discussion: Due to rapidly changing weather conditions in mountain environments the possibility of decreased visibility is a constant threat during storm conditions. Landmarks may become obscured and during white-out conditions a persons sense of direction is easily confused. In this instance the tracks of the victim indicated she had walked in circles for some time before exhaustion set in.

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Distribution:

Employer of Victim
NIOSH, Division of Safety Research
Colorado Division of Risk Management
Colorado State University (OSHA CONSULTATION)
Colorado Coroner's Ass'n
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OSHA Region 8
NIOSH Regional Office
TRADE ASS'N (FOR INDUSTRY INVOLVED)
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