

# Sectoral Network on Occupational Health and Safety in Agriculture to Support Enterprises and Family Farms in Estonia

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**Abstract:** A sectoral network on occupational health and safety in agriculture has been established in Estonia as part of a project that provided support for Estonian accession into European Union. Participating organizations represent farmers' unions at county level, agricultural enterprises, workers' representatives, universities and agricultural expert institutions, and government agencies. The purpose is to provide a shared infrastructure that combines information and other capacities of several organizations and provides a platform for dialogue and co-operation in order to make a greater impact with available resources. The network has a decentralized architecture and is technically managed by an institutionalized secretariat. The network's task forces have compiled a network directory, summarised the capacities and interests of member organizations, made an inventory of existing information and training materials, developed an overall strategy for information management, established an information repository on the Internet, prepared promotional materials, and devised a protocol for agricultural walk-through assessment. A profile on occupational health and safety in Estonian agriculture has been compiled with a rapid assessment approach that collected both quantitative and qualitative information from secondary sources (statistics, documents) and from focus group discussions. The profile is used as an instrument for taking occupational health and safety needs in agriculture into discussion on political arena.

**Key words:** Network, Occupational health, Agriculture, Small-scale industry, Estonia

## Introduction

Estonia is a country in Northern Europe with a population of 1.4 million. The total labor force is 600,000. Estonia was formerly part of the Soviet Union and now is a member of the European Union (EU). During recent years the occupational health and safety (OH&S) system has been rebuilt with the aid from the EU.

The agricultural census of 2001<sup>1)</sup> indicated 31,000 (18,000 regular, 13,000 irregular) wage workers in agriculture. The number of family farms was 68,000 (not all active) and the number of farmers and family members involved in agriculture

was 133,000, only 14,000 of them worked full-time.

It has been difficult to provide OH&S services to agricultural wage workers or private farmers. In fact, such services are nearly non-existent. Awareness about OH&S of politicians, administrators, employers, agricultural workers, and farmers is generally weak.

Initiatives are needed to bring the issue of OH&S in Estonian agriculture into social dialogue and start addressing the existing problems. Establishing a network of stakeholders that have OH&S responsibilities, capacities, or interests is a response to such needs. Building a sectoral network was one of the elements of a recent Estonian-Finnish Twinning Project on Occupational Health Services (2003–2004) that provided support for Estonia's accession into European Union.

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**Table 1. Participating organizations**


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Ministry of Social Affairs
Occupational Health Centre (national)
Labor Inspectorate, Tartu Division
Estonian Farmers' Federation (16 county unions)
Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce
Estonian Plant Production Inspectorate
Confederation of Estonian Food and Land workers'
Tartu University
Tartu County Farmers' Union
Pärnu County Farmers' Union
Harju County Farmers' Union
Rapla County Farmers' Union
OÜ Selja (enterprise)
Peri POÜ (enterprise)
Ida-Viru County Agricultural Producers' Union
Estonian Private Forest Owners' Association

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## Network Concept

A network is a system of interconnected things, points, or people - like a system of rivers, railways, or telephone lines<sup>2)</sup>. An OH&S network also is a system. It is an intellectual instrument that links experts and organizations and facilitates sharing of information, efficient use of resources, and co-operation.

## Participating Organizations

Several organizations participated in the establishment of the network (Table 1). A policy statement was formulated and operational principles agreed upon. It is particularly important that the farmers' federation and county farmers' unions at local level showed keen interest in OH&S and in co-operation.

## Decentralized Network

A decentralized structure was chosen for the network following a model formerly developed by the National OH&S Network in Estonia<sup>3)</sup>. This means that the network does not have a formal director, but is organized on a peer-to-peer basis. Each organization retains its full organisational autonomy when participating in network activities. Thus, participation does not require changes in existing internal practices of member organizations or legal or other considerations. Commitments that might have been difficult to fulfill have not been required.

## Role of the Secretariat

A decentralized network needs administrative care in order to remain functional. A secretariat was selected by member organizations. The secretariat provides technical assistance

**Table 2. Network as a tool for OH&S promotion**


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- Linkage of isolated resources and activities into a larger whole
- Identification of national and local OH&S resources and capacities
- Inclusion of stakeholders in national development
- Instrument for general and focused information dissemination
- Repository for information support on Internet (regulations, good practices, check-lists, etc.)
- Social marketing of OH&S awareness
- Instrument for specific campaigns
- Platform for cooperation and coordination
- Arena for social dialogue

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for organizing network meetings, and for other issues of technical nature such as preparing and distributing a network directory that describes the interests and capacities of member organizations and constructing a network homepage on the Internet. An institutionalised secretariat is a most important prerequisite for the sustainability of a decentralised network.

## Purpose of the Network

The purpose is to provide a mechanism that can cross boarders of organizations horizontally, offers a forum for dialogue, facilitates the use OH&S capacities of other organizations, and provides a shared infrastructure that can combine information and distribution channels of the members. Hence value is added by connecting information and other capacities available at member organizations into value chains of other members.

Information management and development of an information strategy were considered priority issues. Computers and the Internet were regarded as useful tools, but a network mostly gains value from improved interactions between organizations and individuals.

Table 2 shows the perceived potential of the network for promoting OH&S in agriculture.

## Activities

Several task forces were initiated by the network. The task force accomplishments include: compilation of a network directory, review of capacities of member organizations, inventory of information and training materials on OH&S in agriculture, development of an overall strategy for information management, establishment of an information repository on the Internet, preparation of materials for promoting OH&S in agriculture, devising a protocol for agricultural walk-through assessment.

## Profile on OH&S in Agriculture

A prerequisite for improvement is to understand the present.

A sectoral profile on OH&S in Estonian agriculture was compiled using a rapid assessment approach<sup>4)</sup>. The profile provides a panoramic view on OH&S issues in agriculture.

Quantitative information was collected from secondary sources including statistics and documents from ministries, the Statistical Office of Estonia, Labour Inspectorate, universities and technical agencies, and EU development projects. Qualitative information was gathered by discussing with agricultural stakeholders, national authorities and occupational health and safety experts. Three network seminars provided a forum for exchange of perceptions and views of the participants. A SWOT analysis on the strengths and weaknesses of OH&S in Estonian agriculture was conducted.

It turned out that no studies have addressed OH&S hazards or the prevalence of ill-health in Estonian agriculture. Official statistics on work injuries and occupational diseases among agricultural workers and farmers are unreliable for several reasons.

The total work time spent in agriculture can be expressed as 'annual work units' (AWU) - one AWU is 1,800 working hours (225 working days, 8 h per day), or one 'work-year'<sup>1)</sup>.

In 2003 a total of 44 work injuries were notified among 31,000 agricultural wage workers (full-time and part-time) who gathered some 18,000 AWU. The EU average injury rate in agriculture, 7% per year, would predict that some 1,200 work injuries per year might be expected among agricultural wage workers in Estonia. The above calculations only address agricultural work in employment. Yet, most of the agricultural work is done by family farmers and family members, corresponding to 48,000 AWU. The EU average injury rate for 48,000 person-years would predict some 3,400 work injuries occurring in a year in family farms. Most of the work injuries in agriculture are not registered. One reason probably is that there is little benefit from reporting due to lack of insurance system.

The number of occupational diseases reported from agriculture also is very low and reflects obvious underreporting. The reasons for underreporting may include lack of knowledge of family physicians of work-health interactions, and the lack of possibilities of occupational health physicians to examine suspected cases. Furthermore, many wage workers ask physicians not to report an occupational disease because of fear of losing job or of being appraised with lowered work ability. In addition, the great majority of the work force in agriculture lacks access to occupational health services. Family farmers are required to pay by themselves all costs of occupational diseases including diagnostic examinations, and if an occupational disease is detected there is no financial or other compensation thereof.

Other perceived weaknesses, according to the SWOT analysis, include the general lack of knowledge about the scope and nature of OH&S hazards in agriculture due to lack of research, insufficient awareness among farmers about

occupational hazards, their consequences, and preventive measures, lack of guidelines and fact sheets as well as other information materials, poor availability of personal protective equipment and their high cost, nearly non-existent possibilities for vacation and holidays due to deficiency of substitute workers, lack of Insurance Act of Occupational Accidents and Diseases.

## Conclusions

An Estonian network on OH&S in agriculture was successfully established as a low-cost solution for combining the fragmented resources of the participating organisations. The task forces of the network were able to produce within a short period of time essential tools that are needed for strengthening and promoting OH&S in agriculture. The accomplishments include an information management strategy, directory of member organizations, network Web pages of information, inventories of existing training instruments, and new materials for promoting OH&S. These tasks were accomplished without external funding. The establishment of the network was not difficult. It is evident, however, that the sustainability of such a decentralised network will depend on the capacity of the secretariat to provide technical support for the functions of the network.

A particularly important achievement of the network has been the compilation of a profile on OH&S in Estonian agriculture. Flexible rapid assessment techniques turned out to be practical for producing an informative summary that also highlights the stakeholders' views on the state of affairs. The profile has been used as a springboard for social dialogue on OH&S needs of agricultural workers and farmers and as an instrument for taking these issues for discussion on political arena.

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