



Railway Lines Through Farms

A recent death to a farmer's son has highlighted the dangers to farm workers from railway lines that pass through farms. There is often movement of vehicles and livestock across the lines. This bulletin provides practical advice on ways to reduce the risk to the farming community from these hazards.

Most of the advice comes from a farmer who has such a railway line through his farm and is well placed to consider the practical difficulties he has to farm under.

He says:

"I run a 335 hectare sheep and beef farm, and part of the farm (100 hectares) is separate from the main block and is accessible only by crossing a railway line. This is for both vehicle and livestock movement.

There would be very few days that I don't use our crossing to pass over the rail line. The line's main function is the provision of commuter services to and from Wellington. This involves eight trains per day at scheduled and generally reliable times. There are also additional freight trains. Some scheduled and sometimes not. Maintenance gangs in their small trucks also travel the track in their adapted vehicles. It's important to know what's happening on the line. The rail people — Toll NZ ph 0800 872 462 — can tell you.

I have had the occasional surprise but only one fright. Once a silage harvesting machine was on the tracks when a train was coming. The estimate was that only 150 metres separated the train and driver

from sure disaster. Strong winds and noise from the harvester made hearing the train difficult. As a result of this incident Toll NZ contacted me and asked that we improve the viewing from the rail line.

The Toll NZ standard is that from the centre of the line, if we move 5 metres left and right we should still have an unrestricted view for no less than 200 metres along the line. With the assistance of a contractor we removed sufficient trees to improve visibility substantially. We also sprayed vegetation alongside the line. This included gorse and grass. Unfortunately the profile of the track cuts into the land on the southern side of the track so that is where the view is still not as perfect as it could be. Double gates are on each side of the rail line and this means that you have to stop when first going over. However when returning back over the line the gates are invariably still open (if there no stock movements) and there is more risk at this point if you don't stop completely. I would add that having a cab on the tractor dampens sound too much and as a precaution I often turn the tractor off and listen before proceeding.

Getting livestock over the line can present different challenges. Small mobs that know the drill are easy BUT mobs of young stock (e.g. 1200 freshly weaned lambs) can be difficult. I am generally very fussy about what dogs are doing and where I am standing. Folding gates inwards guides the stock a bit better but could add risk to any train that did arrive.

Continued ...

What then are the key points or initiatives to undertake so as to ensure a safe passage for vehicles and livestock?

Vehicles

The guidance of Toll NZ's representatives suggests that at a distance of 5 metres left and right of the centre of the line, there should be 200 metres clear vision along the line.

How this is achieved may vary. Trees may need removal. Gorse or broom (common weeds on railway land) may need spraying and other weeds and grasses may need spraying to enhance vision. This kind of maintenance may need to be completed twice yearly. There is also the option of using special convex mirrors which give vision down the line. These would need to be on both sides and in both directions (i.e. four needed). Cost is a factor and the prospect of vandalism is unfortunately high thereby rendering them useless.

Toll NZ are happy to provide guidance as to their minimum requirements.

Livestock

Livestock provide more complex issues to manage.

Gates must preclude the entry of livestock onto the line at all times.

If cattle are to be crossed over the line then the option of putting electric fencing tape over the line to act as a guide should be considered. (It need not be electrified but will provide a 'mental' barrier.)

The use of tape as a guide will help minimize the time and exposure that cattle will have 'at risk'

Sheep need a greater physical barrier. The use of docking scrim may be sensible for young stock or mobs unfamiliar with the crossing.

Alternatively some farmers now use the orange plastic netting (sometimes used for road works) to guide stock when mustering for docking lambs etc. The orange netting is highly visible and easy to handle. It could be quickly rolled up and stowed safely at the side of the line for reuse at a later date.

The key point is that if a train or maintenance gang did arrive at speed neither the tape or netting would provide any danger to the rail line user whereas steel or wooden gates connected over the line would be a hazard.

The use of 'guides' of whatever sort minimizes the time livestock spend crossing the line enabling the stockman to be in the most appropriate place to observe the livestock and keep an eye on the line.

Farmers should also be aware that 'Train Control' is accessible via an 0800 number. They will know of any unscheduled movements or changes to timetables.

While farmers will not always know when they are going to move livestock over a rail line it is another potential safeguard for prepared movements."

Other suggestions

Can alternative routes can be developed to limit the number of times you need to cross the lines?

Consider whether an underpass can be built. Sometimes a subsidy from Local authorities or Toll NZ may be available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the farmer is entirely responsible to keep the track clear for train traffic. As show above there are many ways this can be done. We commend these comments as real and reasonable suggestions to improve farmer safety near railway lines.