

Farming partnership sentenced as dad crushed by hay bales

A farming partnership in Surrey has been fined £36,000 after a young father was seriously injured.

Christopher Rolfe from Horsham in West Sussex, sustained four rib fractures when five hay bales, each weighing 600kg, toppled and fell on top of him at Polesden Lacey Farm on 28 April 2022.

Just 26 at the time, Christopher had gone into a barn to collect bales that were being delivered to local customers. The bales had been stored on a layer of pallets to keep them off the barn floor, which was damp at the time.



Christopher Rolfe underwent months of rehabilitation in order to regain his mobility

As he was removing the pallets to reach the stack of bales, an entire column of five toppled over and crushed him against the floor. Christopher lay trapped screaming for help until a nearby dog walker heard his cries and alerted the emergency services. He suffered fractures to his pelvis and ankle as well as his ribs.

“I was a stereotypical young man in agriculture. I always thought I’d be fine – as long as I got to drive a quarter of a million pound tractor down the road with everyone looking at me.

“Now that’s the last thing on my mind. I very much look at every piece of machinery in front of me and think how quickly can that thing kill me.

“I was lucky to come away with just a broken hip and leg fractures.”



Christopher had to be airlifted to hospital after the incident – a service that saved his life

He was then airlifted to hospital where he underwent emergency surgery before starting months of rehabilitation in order to regain his mobility to start walking again and caring for his then four-year-old son.

“I was later told that if I had gone by road to the hospital I would have died.

“But at the time, I didn’t even want to go to hospital. The biggest thing that went through my mind at the time was that I’d just ruined my summer!

“Having spoken to the staff at Kent Surrey and Sussex Air Ambulance, I’ve come to realise just how important they are. When I needed them, they were there. My son, who’s now seven is even a young ambassador for them. So something really good has come from a really bad situation.

“My outlook on what happened is that I can’t change it, but I have to deal with what I’ve got.”

Chris has since resumed his career in farming.



Christopher Rolfe was crushed underneath five hay bales

A Health and Safety Executive (HSE) investigation found the poorly constructed stack of bales had not been stacked on firm, dry, level, freely

draining ground but instead on top of old pallets as the barn floor was uneven and prone to waterlogging. The bales were placed in vertical columns and were not 'tied in' by alternating the layers so the bales overlap and stop the stack from splitting. The company had also failed to identify safe working methods for unstacking bales, keeping the face racked back as bales were removed.

HSE guidance states the bottom of a stack should set up a dry, sturdy foundation for all additional bales. Bales should all be 'tied in' and the stack should be monitored to ensure it remains stable. More on this can be found at: [Safe working with bales in agriculture \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/stacking-bales/)

F Conisbee and Sons Ltd, of Ockham Road South, East Horsley, Surrey, pleaded guilty to breaching Regulation 10 (4) of the Work at Height Regulations 2005. The company was fined £36,000 and ordered to pay £4,986 in costs at Staines Magistrates' Court on 15 May 2024.

HSE inspector Sally Parkes said: "This accident would have been easily avoided if the farm had followed the guidance published by either HSE or the National Farmers Union on the safe stacking of bales. Stacking bales requires skill and should be overseen directly by someone with knowledge of the industry guidance.

"Health and safety is a fundamental requirement of a sustainable farming business yet over the last 10 years, almost one person a week is killed and many more are seriously injured as a result of agricultural work.

"Even with the considerable financial stain on UK farming, prioritising health and safety not only ensures workers are kept safe but also improves well-being and health outcomes alongside supporting productivity and efficiency on farms."

This prosecution was brought by HSE enforcement lawyer Jonathan Bambro and supported by HSE paralegal officer Ellen Garbutt.

Notes to editors:

1. [The Health and Safety Executive](https://www.hse.gov.uk/) (HSE) is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. We prevent work-related death, injury and ill health through regulatory actions that range from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors through to targeted interventions on individual businesses. These activities are supported by globally recognised scientific expertise.
2. More information about the [legislation](#) referred to in this case is available.
3. Further details on the latest [HSE news releases](#) is available.