

Cotton industry must heed “look up and live” message

In this edition of *The Australian Cottongrower* you should find an Ergon Energy ‘Look Up and Live’ sticker. In pursuit of the highest safety around powerlines, this should be placed in a visible spot to remind you to look up for powerlines before moving or operating harvesting machinery.

The stickers can be placed on a machine’s cabin door or other position regularly in the operator’s eye.

Multiple incidents involving cotton machinery and overhead power lines are happening each year across Queensland’s cotton growing districts.

Cotton harvesting machinery is much bigger than it once was — particularly module builders and cotton pickers. But this is only part of the reason overhead power lines pose a risk to farmers and harvester operators.

A machinery operator’s attitude and awareness is by far the biggest safety factor around power lines.

Kerry Hoad, a Dalby-based scheduler for Ergon Energy, has had personal experience in operating cotton harvesting machinery. He says taking the time to identify the location of overhead lines before starting work is the first and perhaps most important step towards keeping any farm machine out of high voltage trouble.

“Taking a good look at the paddock you are about to work in and making a mental note of where the lines and poles are is a good start,” says Kerry. “It is then a matter of using a little common sense and perhaps a few extra minutes in a day’s work to avoid any risk.”

Kerry says folding down the rammer arm on a module builder and lowering the machine usually involves operating two levers and takes about 30 seconds.

“This is the best format to move the machine around, particularly anywhere near power lines,” Kerry said, “because rammer arms can be around 12 metres in the air on some module builders when fully extended, with the obvious risk near power lines.”

Cotton pickers also posed a very real risk around lines, with the tipping operation taking the extended height well over the seven metre mark on some machines.



Pickers and module builders can be dangerous around power lines.

“Quite often the operator in a picker will see the danger before they touch lines because they are usually watching the load as it tips — but accidents still happen with these machines too and it is a recipe for disaster.”

Kerry said he has seen tyres literally blown off machinery which had come into contact with power lines.

“That gives you an idea of just how dangerous this kind of mistake can be — it’s not worth the risk to be complacent with the ‘Look up and Live’ message.”

Safe practice around power lines has a legal obligation too.

Changes to the Electricity Act in 2002 now make it compulsory for operators of machinery to become Authorised Persons when working in close proximity to exposed live parts of Ergon Energy’s network.

General Manager Operations Paul Jordon said harvesters and farmers were now required to undergo specific training to become Authorised Persons if they were to be working within three metres of exposed live power lines.

“You don’t need to come into contact with power lines to be at risk of electric shock. Electricity can arc — or jump — if conductive material, (such as a cotton module builder), comes close enough,” Paul said.

He said the advice was even more important given the introduction of new exclusion zone provisions in the Electrical Safety Act.

“In simple terms this means no farm machinery can come within three metres of a powerline unless the operator has received the appropriate training,” Paul said.

Once an operator was trained as an Authorised Person under the Act, they could work up to a metre from low voltage lines and up to 1.4 metres away from all high voltage lines.

Anyone using machinery within 1.8 metres of powerlines must also have a safety observer on hand.

Ergon Energy is urging farmers and harvesters to undertake training if they had not already done so.