



**AtOne<sup>®</sup>**

AGRI HR & Compliance Solutions

# CULTIVATING MENTAL HEALTH IN AGRICULTURE:

A New Era of Workplace  
Responsibility

[www.atonehr.com.au](http://www.atonehr.com.au)



# CULTIVATING MENTAL HEALTH IN AGRICULTURE:

## A New Era of Workplace Responsibility

Mental health is increasingly recognised as a critical component of workplace safety across all sectors—including agriculture. From small family farms to large-scale agribusinesses, workers are exposed to distinctive psychosocial risks, including long hours, geographic isolation, unpredictable environmental conditions, and intense physical demands. Recent regulatory reforms across Australia now require employers to identify and manage these risks, signalling a significant shift toward proactive and accountable mental health practices within the agricultural industry.

## Foundations of the Psychological Safety Regulations

This regulatory shift brings mental health into sharper focus for agricultural employers, prompting a reassessment of workplace practices and responsibilities. To understand the foundations of these changes and their implications for farms and agribusinesses, it's important to examine the inquiries that shaped Australia's new approach to psychological safety.

- ✓ **The Boland Review (2018)**, commissioned by Safe Work Australia, found that psychosocial hazards, such as isolation, bullying, and high job demands were not adequately addressed under existing Work Health and Safety laws.

For agricultural settings, this includes risks like long hours, seasonal pressures, and limited access to support services. The review recommended clearer legal definitions and enforceable duties, laying the groundwork for integrating psychological health into safety frameworks relevant to farms, agribusinesses, and rural operations.

- ✓ **The Royal Commission into Mental Health Systems (2019–2021)**, while state-based, highlighted the broader impact of workplace conditions on mental wellbeing. Its findings underscored the importance of early intervention and employer accountability—principles that apply directly to agricultural employers managing remote teams, family-run farms, and seasonal workers.



- ✓ **The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health (2020)** framed mental health as both a public health and economic issue. It revealed that poor mental health costs the national economy billions annually in lost productivity. For agriculture, this translates into reduced output, increased absenteeism, and long-term sustainability risks. The inquiry called for reforms to reduce stigma, improve access to support, and embed mental health into workplace safety systems.

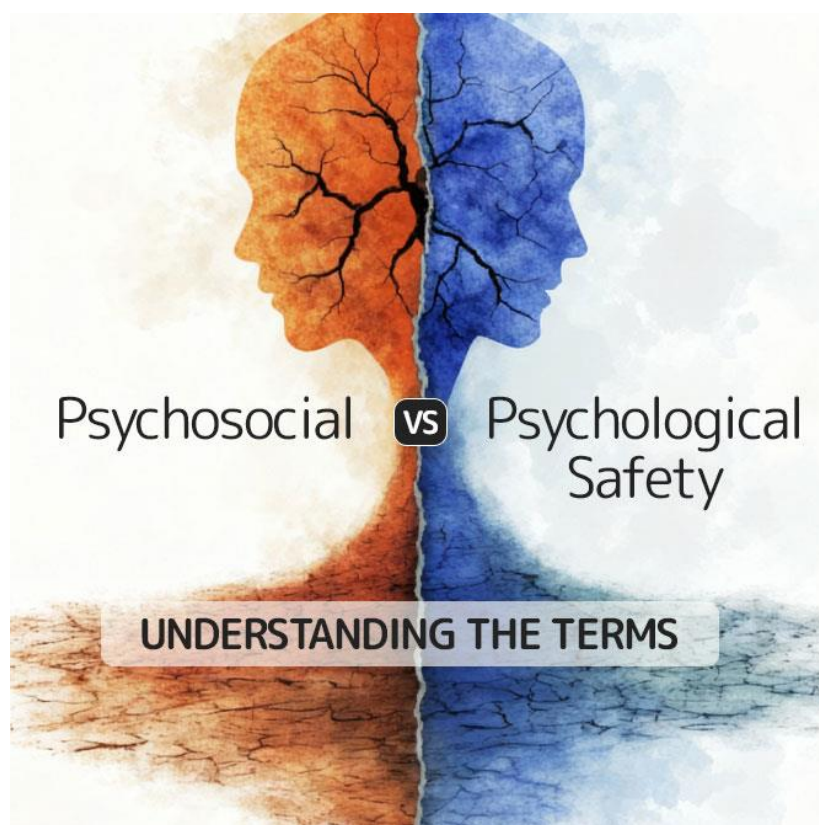
Together, these inquiries provided a strong foundation for regulatory reform.


In summary:

- ✓ The Boland Review **established the legal imperative**.
- ✓ The Royal Commission **emphasised the social and clinical urgency**.
- ✓ The Productivity Commission **reinforced the economic rationale**.
- ✓ Their combined influence is reflected in the regulations' focus on proactive risk management, structural controls, and **enforceable duties for employers**.

## Understanding the Terms: Psychosocial vs. Psychological Safety

Psychosocial safety and psychological safety are related but distinct concepts in workplace wellbeing.



- 
- ✓ **Psychosocial Safety** is about preventing harm from work-related stressors like bullying, excessive workloads, or poor role clarity. It's now a legal requirement under occupational health laws.
  - ✓ **Psychological Safety** refers to a culture where people feel safe to speak up, share ideas, and admit mistakes. While not mandated, it's essential for trust and collaboration.

Together, they form a complete approach to wellbeing, protecting workers from harm while fostering open communication.

## What's Changing in Agricultural Workplaces?

**New workplace safety regulations** across Australia are reshaping how employers in the agricultural sector must approach mental health and wellbeing. These changes are not just about ticking compliance boxes, they're about creating safer, more sustainable work environments for **everyone involved in the food and fibre supply chain**.

These reforms apply to all states that have adopted the model WHS laws and reflect a broader national commitment to mental health at work. In short, Agricultural employers must now **treat psychological risks as equal to physical risks under WHS law**.

These changes respond to national inquiries and reviews, including the Boland Review, the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health, and various state-based mental health commissions.

## How Victoria's Approach Differs

While most Australian jurisdictions follow the model WHS regulations, Victoria has introduced its own Occupational Health and Safety (Psychological Health) Regulations 2025, which go further in several key areas:

- ✓ Higher-order controls are mandatory in Victoria. Employers must redesign work tasks or systems where possible, rather than relying on training alone.
- ✓ WorkSafe Victoria enforces compliance using a dedicated Compliance Code and industry-specific templates.
- ✓ Coverage includes contractors and volunteers, with stricter documentation requirements.

For Agri-businesses operating across multiple states, aligning with Victoria's stricter standards can help ensure consistency, reduce legal risk, and demonstrate a proactive commitment to mental health.

While other jurisdictions offer more flexibility, the underlying expectation is the same: Psychosocial risks must be identified, managed, **and treated as seriously as physical hazards**.

## Summary of Key Differences

FEATURE	OTHER STATES (MODEL WHS LAWS)	VICTORIA (2025)
<b>Legislative Framework</b>	Guidance only, not legally binding.	Enforceable regulations under the OHS Act 2004.
<b>Adoption Date</b>	Varies by state, generally adopted from 2022 onwards.	1 December 2025
<b>Control Measures</b>	Encourages higher-order controls but doesn't prohibit reliance on training.	Must use higher-order controls (e.g. redesign work). Training alone is prohibited.
<b>Hazard Definition</b>	General categories listed, fewer examples, more open to interpretation.	Detailed list including role clarity, organisational justice, remote work, trauma exposure etc.
<b>Enforcement Body</b>	Enforcement varies.	Active enforcement by WorkSafe Victoria.
<b>Compliance Support</b>	Codes of Practice + some states offer supplementary guidance materials.	Dedicated Compliance Code with templates and examples.

## Obligations for Agricultural Employers

These regulations include the obligation to:

- ✓ **Define Psychosocial Hazards** as factors in work design, systems, management, or interpersonal interactions that may cause negative psychological responses (e.g., bullying, harassment, occupational violence, traumatic content).
- ✓ **Identify**, eliminate, or control these hazards as far as reasonably practicable.
- ✓ **Mandate Risk Reviews** and control measures for psychosocial hazards.
- ✓ **Introduce compliance codes and templates** to help employers meet their duties, including prevention plans and digital training resources.

Sham contracting is when a worker is wrongly classified as an independent contractor to avoid paying entitlements like superannuation, leave, or minimum wage. This practice is illegal and a major focus of the Closing Loophole laws, which came into effect in 2024.



## Practically what does this look like?

To meet their legal obligations, agricultural employers, whether running a family farm or managing a large agribusiness, should take the following steps:

### Leadership & Governance

- ✓ Train farm managers and supervisors in mental health awareness and psychosocial risk response.
- ✓ Embed psychological safety into WHS planning and business strategy.

### Risk Identification

- ✓ Conduct informal check-ins, surveys, or interviews to identify stressors.
- ✓ Track patterns in absenteeism, turnover, or workplace conflict.
- ✓ Maintain a Psychosocial Risk Register to document findings and priorities.

### Control Measures

- ✓ Offer flexible scheduling, especially during peak seasons or adverse weather.
- ✓ Provide access to mental health resources, including rural-specific support services and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).
- ✓ Clarify roles and expectations, especially for casual, seasonal, or contract workers.
- ✓ Implement respectful workplace policies and clear grievance procedures.

### Training & Capability

- ✓ Deliver training on psychosocial hazards and respectful conduct tailored to rural settings.
- ✓ Equip leaders with conflict resolution, early intervention, and mental health first aid skills.
- ✓ Track training completion using a simple system or checklist.

### Communication & Review

- ✓ Include psychological safety in toolbox talks, WHS meetings, and team briefings.
- ✓ Encourage feedback and reporting, especially from isolated or remote workers.
- ✓ Review risks annually or after major events (e.g., bushfires, floods, market disruptions).

## Why Agriculture Needs This

Agriculture presents a unique set of psychosocial challenges that make mental health protection especially important.

### Remote & Isolated Work

We know that many agricultural workers operate in remote areas and are often alone for long periods. This isolation can increase the risk of mental health issues and reduce access to support services.

### Unpredictability

Farming is subject to unpredictable variables like weather and market fluctuations which can all create chronic stress, whilst peak seasons like harvest, long hours and physical exhaustion compound the pressure. Furthermore, agricultural workers often face distressing situations such as natural disasters, fatal accidents, trauma and injury to livestock. Without proper support, these experiences can lead to long-term psychological harm.

### Family-Run Businesses

In many cases, farms are family-owned, which can blur the lines between personal and professional life. This dynamic can make it harder to address conflict, workload issues, or burnout.

## Legal and Financial Consequences

Failing to manage psychosocial hazards is no longer just a moral oversight, **it now carries serious legal and financial risks** for agricultural businesses.

### Criminal Liability

- ✓ Employers and officers can face criminal charges if they fail to control risks like bullying, harassment, excessive workloads, or exposure to trauma.
- ✓ This includes family farms and partnerships, not just large corporations.
- ✓ Independent contractors and their workers are also covered, meaning compliance must extend across the entire workforce.

### Financial Penalties

- ✓ Fines under safety laws can reach hundreds of thousands of dollars.
- ✓ **A landmark case in 2023 saw an employer fined \$380,000** after a toxic workplace culture contributed to an employee's suicide.

### Increased Enforcement

- ✓ Regulators are expected to actively investigate and prosecute breaches, especially where mental injury or harm is evident.

## Final Thoughts

Agriculture is the backbone of Australia's economy, but it's also one of the most demanding industries, both physically and mentally. As **new regulations elevate psychological safety** to the same level of importance as physical safety, agricultural employers have a unique opportunity to lead with care.

Addressing mental health risks like isolation, burnout, and trauma isn't just about compliance, it's about protecting your people, improving productivity, and building trust. A mentally healthy workplace attracts talent, reduces claims, and strengthens the future of farming. In today's landscape, supporting mental wellbeing is no longer optional, it's smart, sustainable leadership.

As agriculture evolves, so must our approach to wellbeing. Embedding psychological safety into everyday practice isn't just good policy, **it's a commitment to the people who power the industry.**