

KEEPING THE CAMPERS HAPPY

What does being an HSR mean when you are a technical expert with operational management responsibilities which extend to the remotest of work sites? **HEATHER WRIGHT** finds out.

Beth Williamson: being an HSR is about making people feel heard and supported.

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Seven days spent based in a corrugated iron hut, miles from home, battling heat and fatigue – it's all in a day's work for Boffa Miskell's contractor crews working on the National Wilding Pine programme. So when Beth Williamson stepped into the role of health and safety representative, she knew that ticking boxes wouldn't be enough – health and safety had to be practical, human, and adaptable to the tough working conditions.

"What drove me to sign up to be an HSR was that there was some room for improvement internally and I wanted to be a voice for the sciences team – biosecurity and ecology," says Williamson, an early career biosecurity consultant with Boffa Miskell who won the HSR category at this year's Awards.

Around 25% of environmental consultancy Boffa Miskell's team are field workers, often operating in remote, high risk areas. In her role managing operations in the National Wilding Conifer Control programme at Molesworth Station, where crews live and work remotely, Williamson had been exposed to higher risk activities in the biosecurity space involving weed spraying and helicopter use, and back country work including remote camping, chainsaw use and predator control.

"I like being part of continuous improvement and coming up with practical ideas on how we can make sure staff and contractors are safe."

A CHALLENGING SITUATION

Her commitment was tested when in late 2023, while carrying out weed control in a South Island river, two contracted workers lost their footing while crossing the river and were swept into a willow tree before emerging safely, without injury.

The incident resulted in a pause to operations, providing time to conduct the investigation and allowing the contractor

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to make improvements to their health and safety systems and processes.

As site manager for the contractor’s work in this location, Williamson – still new to the HSR role – was heavily involved in the investigation under the guidance of Boffa Miskell’s HSW advisor, Susi Ratakar.

“The contractors had been working for us for seven years, and I was relatively junior on our team, so it was an interesting experience for me to go through a full investigation with them,” Williamson recalls.

It would prove a stressful few months, as she was responsible for communication with the subcontractor, including post-event interviews to gather statements, subsequent check-ins with affected individuals, and reviewing documentation including standard operating procedures, toolbox talks, training matrices and site-specific safety plans. She worked with the client, contractor and HSW advisor to develop specific, time-bound recommendations which would enable the contractor to recommence their work. Her duties included communicating these requirements and ensuring they were achieved within the agreed timeframes, along with sufficient evidence to prove compliance.

However, despite months of support, the contractor failed to meet expectations at the final site audit and their contract was terminated.

“Being someone early in their career, making that recommendation was difficult. But they didn’t put value on continuous improvement and improving the standards that all their employees should be meeting.”

Her lesson? “Be confident, and ensure you have all the evidence there if you have to make that decision.”

ON MOLESWORTH STATION

Williamson is also proud of her work establishing safe systems for on-

site working in the Saxton River at Molesworth Station. A number of PCBU’s are involved, including the Ministry for Primary Industries, Marlborough District Council, the Department of Conservation and Pāmu Landcorp, with multiple subcontractors delivering operations.

Williamson’s role involved coordinating with all the PCBU’s to ensure crews of up to 14 people could safely live and work in the remote area for multiple work periods, each of seven days. She brought all the parties together on a site visit to go through all the risks to the site – including some such as rockfall, which couldn’t be eliminated – and coordinate controls that all PCBU’s could agree to.

“The big thing was just getting everyone who needed to be there involved on site to make decisions together rather than things trickling up and down the PCBU chain and getting misconstrued, or having people feel they’d been left out of the decision making.”

It wasn’t all about the more obvious risks. Toilet facilities were improved, and Starlink was set up to provide a connection out. “Having access to wifi is a game changer for long term remote work.”

WELLBEING AND FATIGUE

Running remote operations also presents challenges on the mental health front. The wifi is a key part of mitigating that, providing a means for workers to contact family and friends throughout the week, or just spend some time on Facebook or scrolling Instagram, “whatever makes you happy in your evenings”.

Ensuring the team have space for some privacy is also important, with a living space they can go and relax in. Then there’s the question of fatigue.

“I’m constantly thinking about the fatigue levels because some people just want to work big hours.”

Williamson is keen to impress on

workers the importance of managing fatigue and ensuring they have the opportunity to bring up if they’re feeling tired and on the day need a late start or an early finish.

“With a lot of jobs there’s this operational kind of urgency, where you have to be finished by a set time, so the crews can feel pressure to work really big days.”

To help manage mental health she ensures they know about contingency plans, and that it’s not the end of the world if a block of work isn’t finished on the specified day.

“I’d rather they be sustainable about their working efforts than push the boundaries and put their lives at risk.”

REWARDS OF BEING A REP

Williamson has also been instrumental in improving field tools to be more user-friendly and efficient, including providing additional functionality to complete toolbox meetings when out of coverage, merging vehicle check and toolbox meeting forms, and championing Get Home Safe external monitoring and pushing for it to be set up across all offices.

The most rewarding part of being an HSR, she says, is seeing meaningful change.

“When someone comes to me with an issue and we fix it – that’s huge. It’s about making people feel heard and supported.”

Her advice to aspiring HSRs? “Back yourself. If you believe in something, don’t be afraid to speak up.”

Williamson says it’s important to respect paperwork, but make sure it works alongside practical solutions that keep people safe.

“Health and safety is about caring for people, not just ticking boxes. Find the balance of having really practical things that are fit for purpose for employees and contractors and are easy and practical to implement.” ■