



# Safety Note

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY



Safety Note #89

## FIELDWORK SAFETY: TERRAIN



*Photograph Courtesy of Sierra Foothill REC*

The terrain where fieldwork is conducted may range from relatively flat land to steep, rugged topography and from wetland to desert conditions. Precautions to prevent injury vary somewhat depending on the type of terrain encompassed by the field area.

Common injuries that are related to field-area terrain include strains, sprains, cuts, and bruises. By taking several simple precautions and becoming familiar with the field area(s), employees can control and/or reduce exposure to conditions that may cause fieldwork injuries.

The following fieldwork precautions should be followed to reduce the potential for incurring terrain-related injuries:

- It is a prudent practice to work with a partner in remote field areas.
- Know the daily route(s) you will be taking during your fieldwork. Carry a reference field-route or -location map, if necessary.
- Always treat hilly and mountainous topography with caution. Carefully pick the spots where you intend to step. Be careful of dislodging rocks onto other fieldworkers below or following you.
- Walk carefully in uneven terrain, especially when the ground surface may be obscured by vegetation or during twilight or at night.
- Dress appropriately for field area terrain: as necessary wear a hat, long pants, boots or sturdy shoes, and eye protection (i.e., sunglasses).
- Rock climbing without proper experience or equipment is dangerous and ill advised.
- Always be aware of potential temperature extremes associated with field-area terrain. Extreme temperatures may cause heat or cold stress. See Safety Notes #20 and #54 for information about preventing Heat Stress and Cold Stress, respectively.
- Be particularly alert for falling rocks, rock slides, or rock falls when working in proximity to cliff faces or steep rock outcrops. Wear a safety hat when working in areas where falling rocks are common.
- When performing fieldwork in wet areas or in proximity to water, beware of stepping onto slippery rocks, slopes, or ground.
- When working in wetland areas, be cautious of stepping onto unsupported vegetation, soft mud, or quicksand. Use a pole or branch to probe the path surface ahead of you when traversing wetland areas.
- Be conscious of tidal cycles when performing fieldwork in coastal and estuarine wetland areas. Consult tide tables or similar reference materials and plan your fieldwork accordingly.