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Reduce Farm Injury Risks on Roads

Joel DeJong, Field Agronomist, adapted from the ISU publication of the same name.

It's late in the afternoon during fall harvest and you are hauling an empty wagon back from the elevator. Without warning a car hits your wagon from behind. Or, the combine is waiting for you to return to the field. As you slow down to turn left into a field, a car trying to pass sideswipes your tractor. Both situations are common in Iowa. The Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT) records the number of collisions on public roads and right-of-way that involve farm vehicles. Collisions occur throughout the year but are somewhat more common during fall harvest. The most common collisions occur when the approaching motorist hits a farm vehicle from behind (rear-end collision), or when a passing motorist hits a farm vehicle that is attempting to make a wide left turn (left sideswipe). These two situations each account for 22 percent of the total number of two-vehicle collisions in Iowa that involve a farm vehicle. Although only a small percentage of vehicular injuries lead to a fatality, the National Safety Council and IDOT data show that a collision involving a farm vehicle is about five times more likely to produce a fatality than other types of motor vehicle accidents.

When a farm vehicle is involved in a collision in the public right-of-way, there often is a large difference in the relative speed of the two vehicles. A passenger car traveling at 55 miles per hour approaches a tractor traveling in the same direction at 15 miles per hour at a rate of 59 feet per second. If the car does not slow down, it reduces the distance between itself and the tractor by the length of a football field in just 5 seconds. Motorists can quickly come up on a farm vehicle unless they brake as soon as they see the farm vehicle. However, a car traveling at 55 miles per hour requires 224 feet of total stopping distance (for average reaction time and braking). Therefore, the driver of the car in the previous example would have only a few seconds to decide to slow down and avoid a collision with the tractor.

Non-farm motorists may not immediately recognize farm equipment on roadways or be aware of the special hazards they present. Lighting and reflector locations on tractors, combines, and other farm equipment are different from other motor vehicles. During either day or night, an unfamiliar vehicle outline may delay recognition of farm vehicles by the nonfarm motorist. Loads on farm vehicles may be wider than other vehicles, which present special hazards for other motorists when left, right, rear, and front projections are not easily recognizable.

The slow-moving vehicle (SMV) emblem is recognizable to many non-farm motorists. It's important to maintain SMV emblems, as well as other reflectors, lighting, and equipment systems, to provide maximum visibility of farm vehicles to other motorists. A check of lighting and marking on 130 tractors and wagons during harvest at

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Iowa grain elevators showed that although front lighting (both white and amber flashing warning lights) was being well maintained, rear lighting and marking was often substandard. Because a common collision situation involves a second vehicle approaching from the rear, equipment operators should pay special attention to rear lighting and marking.

Non-farm motorists may not understand farm equipment limitations or see hidden field entrances. For example, the broad turning radius of many tractor-implement combinations requires operators to steer slightly to the right before making a wide left turn. Although a tractor operator may be using a left-turn signal, it may be hidden from the rear by another implement, or motorists may ignore the signal and think the tractor is turning right. The result is a left sideswipe of the farm vehicle by the non-farm motorist who is trying to pass the farm vehicle.

As harvest approaches, we know there will be much heavier farm traffic on the road. Crop producers – be certain your equipment is well marked and lit. For all motorists, be prepared to encounter slower moving vehicles. Plan extra time for travel, and don't get impatient on the roads.

Article adapted from "Reduce farm injury risks on roads" by Mark Hanna and Charles Schwab. Download the complete publication online at https://store.extension.iastate.edu/product/5067.

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