



Driving Defensively in Rural America

If there were ever a reason for driving defensively, it has to be the fall. This is especially true in rural areas where slow-moving farm machinery shares the road with high-speed vehicular traffic during the harvest season.

Several respected members of the agricultural safety team in the United States have spent a considerable amount of time studying the data and suggesting ways to reduce the number of collisions between vehicles and farm equipment on rural highways. Dr. Tom Bean in Ohio, Dr. Bob Aherin in Illinois, and Dr. Chuck Schwab in Iowa have all taken a close look at the problem. In their states, as in most other agricultural states, the data shows that many collisions occur on dry, straight and well-lighted highways. Incident reports also indicate that vehicle skid marks are often missing, most likely pointing to the fast closure time between farm equipment operating at less than 25 miles per hour and vehicles operating at 55 miles per hour and higher.

Collision rates are particularly high in the fall when crops are being moved from the field to farm or elevator storage facilities. In many collisions, vehicles either rear-end or sideswipe farm equipment, with the vehicle occupants often suffering severe injuries. In one collision in Iowa in 1998, a full-size automobile traveling an estimate 60 miles per hour hit the left-rear dual wheels of a 20,000-lb. farm tractor and careened into a ditch on the opposite side of the road. State troopers investigating the incident reported that the impact destroyed the automobile, but only slightly bent the outside wheel rim on the tractor. In fact, the report stated that the impact pushed the tractor a mere several inches from its original location.

What can farm equipment and vehicle operators do to prevent these incidents? First of all, farm equipment that travels on public highways should be clearly marked with SMV (slow-moving vehicle) emblems. In addition, farm tractors should have properly functioning emergency lighting that is clearly visible to approaching traffic. It may also be appropriate for some large farm machinery to be followed by an escort vehicle that has proper signage, flags and flashing yellow lights on while on the open road.

Vehicle operators must be diligent when driving on rural highways. Follow these safety tips:

- When approaching farm machinery, be prepared to stop, since the equipment operator may not have a clear view of the road to the rear.
- Watch carefully for equipment that is about to turn from the traveled road surface into a field or farm lane.
- Do not pass the machinery on a hill or curve where the sight distance does not permit a safe pass.
- Be prepared to yield, if necessary, to farm machinery that is approaching a small bridge or overpass, since your vehicle cannot safely share the highway.
- At dusk or after dark, slow immediately upon spotting flashing lights in the roadway ahead. You will need to determine the speed, width and hazards associated with the equipment displaying the warning lights.

- Dr. Sam Steel
Agriculture Division

*Copyright 2002 * National Safety Council * All Rights Reserved.*