



Field to Field: Yield to Trains!

Collisions between trains and farm equipment don't get a lot of press. One of the most severe in recent memory occurred during the last month of 1999 in Iowa at a "passive" crossing—one without gates, bells, lights or active warning devices. A Union Pacific freight train collided with a farm tractor pulling a liquid manure slurry tank at the crossing, which was located near a large hog farm. The collision resulted in the death of the engineer and damages that will run into the millions. The director of safety at Union Pacific stated several weeks after the incident, "We lost one of our best engine crewmen in an incident that should never have happened."

Incidents like these can result when tractor operators become complacent about familiar crossings. Passive crossings are often found in rural and agricultural areas. Some of these crossings provide no more than access from one field to another. They are often just planks laid between rails with gravel or stone on each side to permit access for farm equipment.

According to Federal Railroad Administration data, there are 45,000 private railroad crossings with no active warning devices in the major agricultural states. The data that is difficult to obtain relates to how often farm machinery is involved in collisions. Train crews on the Canadian National (formerly the Illinois Central) who operate in western Illinois and eastern Iowa will often discuss the close calls and "near hits" in that region. Many of these incidents happen at the same crossings over and over again. In addition, many of these crossings include access lanes or roads that run parallel with the tracks for a certain distance, then turn and cross the tracks abruptly.

At 50 mph, trains take at least a mile to stop. In the incident involving the manure tank, the lead engine, second engine and another 10 cars derailed, overturned and caught fire. The lead engine hit the farmer's tank, severing it from the tractor at the drawbar.

A number of organizations are committed to reducing the risk of collisions at these crossings. For example, Operation Lifesaver has been actively involved in crossing safety for 25 years. The group receives considerable support from the railroads for crossing-safety initiatives and also has the assistance and support of the National Transportation Safety Board. During the past year, these organizations and the National Safety Council have partnered on behalf of a program titled "Field to Field: Yield to Trains." The decal pictured is part of this initiative, which aims to make farm equipment operators more aware of the dangers at passive crossings.

For more information on this initiative, contact Sam Steel at the National Safety Council, (800) 621-7615, ext. 2023.

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