



Knuckle Down and Buckle Up!

It's been getting more and more difficult to accept the troubling statistics on farm tractor seatbelt use. But if you think back many years ago to the introduction of seatbelts among the general public, it's not so hard to understand. The data then indicated that only 10% of vehicle operators were using their seatbelts on a regular basis. Today the data for tractor operators is much the same.

It took a lot of hard work all those years ago to convince vehicle operators and passengers to wear their seatbelts every time they were traveling--no matter how short or long the trip. The general assumption then was that most accidents occurred on trips that covered great distances. But, safety experts came up with some pretty convincing data that showed that more people were injured in incidents close to home.

A real dilemma exists for farm safety professionals. Farm tractors hardly ever operate very far from home and many farm tractor activities involve chores that require operators to be on and off the equipment on a regular basis. Thus, you often hear the typical argument that putting the seatbelt on and off is a real hassle. Another justification for not using the seatbelt is the complaint about the dirtiness of the belt and how it transfers dirt to overalls or work clothes. And of course, since seatbelt use on tractors is not required, many operators are not motivated by mandates or regulations.

Let's be perfectly clear about seatbelt use on farm tractors that are equipped with rollover protection. They will prevent serious injury and death if they are used all of the time – not just 10 percent of the time. The statistics are consistent from all agencies and organizations, each year between 250-300 tractor operators and passengers are killed in farm tractor overturns and runovers. While there are a few ROPS equipped tractor models with an extra seat, the vast majority have only one seat and one seatbelt, and it is meant to be used by the operator.

Seatbelt use on ROPS equipped farm tractors makes sense from many perspectives. Adults who want to set a good example for their own youngsters will always require seatbelt use, both on their farm machinery and in their family's cars and trucks. Seatbelts significantly reduce the chance of serious injuries, including disabling injuries that could severely limit a farmer's ability to farm or work his or her spread.

It certainly made sense several years ago to a donor at the National Education Center for Agricultural Safety in Peosta, Iowa. While meeting with the Center's staff on a donation of equipment for rescue training, his own justification for making the donation was that a "seriously injured or dead farmer was not going to be a continuing customer for his equipment business." He would do what he could to help farm safety professionals spread the word about the safe operation and maintenance of farm equipment. Don't the rest of us have even more compelling reasons to do the same?

- Dr. Sam Steel
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