

Sharing the Road in the Winter

LONNIE MENGARELLI – AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES AGENT

As winter hay feeding and field work is ramping up in the Southwind District, I was recently reminded how dangerous our roads can be for farmers. Tractors, sprayers, and tillage equipment move steadily from pasture to pasture and field to field, often at a crawl, while motorists impatiently line up behind them. It's a scene immortalized in the Craig Morgan hit "International Harvester," but in real life, the stakes are much higher than a country song lyric.

I reached out to my academic advisor at Kanas State to visit with him about farm equipment on public roads.

With increased interaction between farm machinery and passenger vehicles comes an increased risk of crashes and injuries, said Ed Brokesh, assistant professor in Kansas State University's Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering.

"When there is a collision with machinery on main roads, most of the time somebody is traveling at a higher rate of speed that greatly contrasts that piece of equipment," Brokesh said. "That leads to rear-end or side-swipe incidents, and 39% of the time it involves a tractor."

Wrongful passing and left-hand turns are also common causes of serious incidents. The danger, Brokesh explained, stems from the extreme size and weight difference between agricultural equipment and automobiles.

"The smaller party is the one that is going to take the brunt of the damage," he said. "When there is harm — a fatality or an injury — it is usually to those in the pickup, car or utility vehicle."

These realities place added responsibility on producers to ensure experienced operators are behind the wheel when equipment is on public roads. According to Brokesh, younger or less-skilled drivers are disproportionately involved in roading accidents.

"Those who are under 16 or are newly hired are more likely to get into trouble," he said.

To reduce the likelihood of incidents, Brokesh recommends producers set minimum age requirements for employees who operate machinery on public roads.

"If someone is unfamiliar with a piece of equipment, let's just not send them out on the road," he said. "At a minimum, operators should have a driver's license or learner's permit."

Training is equally important. Simply pointing to a tractor and telling a new hire to "go figure it out" is a recipe for disaster, Brokesh said.

"Take some time with them and explain the equipment, how it handles, and how it should be operated both in the field and on the road," he said.

Other safety practices producers should prioritize include driving defensively, monitoring traffic in rear-view mirrors, properly marking equipment, cleaning reflectors, and replacing faulty lighting systems.

Still, Brokesh emphasized that roadway safety is a shared responsibility.

"This is a two-way street," he said. "As an industry, we need to advocate for more training and awareness involving agricultural equipment on roads. Educating all motorists on how to safely share the road with farm machinery will lower the risk of accidents for everyone."

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For motorists and farmers alike, patience, visibility and awareness can mean the difference between a safe harvest season and a tragic one. Remember Farmers have the same right to use public roads as other vehicles. Share the road.

Lonnie Mengarelli is a K-State Research and Extension Agriculture agent assigned to Southwind District. He may be reached at mengo57@ksu.edu or 620-223-3720