



Sharing the Road Safely with Farm Equipment

As we move out of the dog days of summer and into harvest season, many of our rural roads will start seeing a little more traffic. Farm equipment is essential to agriculture, but moving tractors, combines, sprayers, and other machinery on public roads creates serious risks. These machines are often wider, taller, and slower than surrounding traffic. They may also have limited visibility and require more room to stop or turn.

A tractor traveling 15 miles per hour may appear to be moving faster when approached from behind. A motorist traveling 55 miles per hour can close a 300-foot gap in only a few seconds. Preventing collisions requires farmers, employees, and other drivers to recognize the hazards and share responsibility for roadway safety.

What Farmers Can Do

Farm owners and managers should establish clear procedures for moving equipment on public roads. Before any trip, inspect the equipment and confirm that lights, turn signals, brakes, tires, mirrors, and steering systems are working correctly. Make sure all warning devices are clean and visible.

Every slow-moving vehicle should display a clean, properly mounted slow-moving vehicle emblem when required. Reflective tape, flashing amber lights, headlights, taillights, and other markings can help motorists recognize farm equipment sooner. Farmers should verify that their equipment complies with applicable state and local roadway requirements.

Plan the route before entering the roadway. Whenever possible, avoid busy roads, sharp curves, narrow bridges, steep hills, school traffic, and periods of heavy commuter travel. Consider using an escort vehicle when moving especially wide or long equipment. Escorts can alert approaching motorists and help operators navigate intersections, bridges, and other difficult locations.

Farmers should also consider equipment width, overhead clearance, and roadside obstacles. Folding or securing booms, headers, attachments, and other components can reduce the machine's roadway profile. Equipment should never carry an unsecured load that could fall, shift, or block warning lights.

Provide employees with training before allowing them to operate equipment on public roads. Training should cover inspections, safe operating speeds, turning procedures, communication, railroad crossings, breakdowns, and emergency response. Only trained and authorized employees should move farm equipment on public roads. Don't forget, if you do not document the training, it never happened.

What Farm Employees Can Do

Employees should complete a pre-trip inspection before every roadway movement. Report damaged lights, missing reflectors, worn tires, steering problems, brake issues, or an unreadable slow-moving vehicle emblem before leaving the property. Never operate equipment that cannot be moved safely.

Wear the seat belt whenever the machine is equipped with a rollover protective structure. Keep doors closed, remain seated, and avoid distractions such as texting or adjusting electronic devices while moving. Extra riders should not be allowed unless the equipment includes a manufacturer-approved passenger seat.

Operators should drive at a safe speed and remain as far to the right as practical without entering an unsafe shoulder, ditch, or unstable surface. Watch for mailboxes, signs, guardrails, utility poles, low tree limbs, and other obstacles that may require the equipment to move toward the center of the road.

Use turn signals when available, but do not assume motorists understand your intentions. A tractor that moves to the right may be preparing to make a wide left turn instead of inviting traffic to pass. Check mirrors carefully and look for vehicles attempting to pass before turning.

Maintain additional caution on hills and curves, when approaching drivers that may have little time to react. If traffic begins to back up, pull over at a safe location when possible and allow vehicles to pass. Do not wave motorists around the equipment; the operator may not be able to confirm that the entire passing lane is clear.

If the equipment becomes disabled, move it off the roadway if this can be done safely. Activate warning lights, use reflective triangles or other emergency warning devices, and notify the farm manager. Employees should never stand in an active travel lane while attempting to direct traffic or make repairs.

What Other Drivers Can Do

Motorists should slow down as soon as they see farm equipment or a slow-moving vehicle emblem. Increase following distance and be prepared for the equipment to stop or turn unexpectedly. Tailgating reduces visibility and places the driver in an area the equipment operator may not be able to see.

Do not assume the operator knows you are behind the machine. Farm equipment has large blind spots, and noise may prevent the operator from hearing an approaching vehicle. Stay where the operator can see you in a mirror and avoid lingering beside the equipment.

Pass only when it is legal and clearly safe. Never pass near intersections, railroad crossings, bridges, hills, curves, or other areas where visibility is limited. Before passing, make sure there is enough unobstructed roadway to clear the entire machine and any attachments or escort vehicles. Do not attempt to squeeze past wide equipment on a narrow road or shoulder.

Motorists should also watch carefully for left turns. Because farm equipment may need to swing right before turning left, movement toward the shoulder does not necessarily mean the operator wants traffic to pass. Look for turn signals, hand signals, driveways, field entrances, and gaps in fences that may indicate an upcoming turn.

Patience is one of the most important safety tools. A short delay is far better than a collision involving a large piece of machinery.

Roadway Safety Is a Shared Responsibility

Safely moving farm equipment requires preparation, training, visibility, communication, and patience. Farmers must maintain equipment and establish safe procedures. Employees must inspect and operate machinery responsibly. Other drivers must slow down, allow adequate space, and pass only when it is safe.

Everyone using rural roads has the same goal: reaching the destination without an injury. When farmers, employees, and motorists respect each other and recognize the unique hazards of farm machinery, serious roadway collisions can be prevented.