

Farmer Dies After Being Run Over By Tractor and Stalk Chopper

SUMMARY

The victim was alone at the time that the incident occurred. This report is based upon a review of a written sheriff's department report, and a review of their photos of the incident site.

A 53-year-old farmer (victim) died from injuries sustained when he was run over by a tractor and a stalk chopper. The tractor was equipped with an enclosed rollover protective structure cab and a seatbelt. The victim began chopping stalks in a harvested corn field on the day of the incident. The tractor was operated with the transmission in sixth gear and the throttle at it's highest speed position. After he had been working for several hours, he arrived at one end of the field with the tractor and chopper. At the end of the field, the victim apparently was either thrown from or fell from the tractor. The tractor and chopper continued to travel in a circular pattern across an adjoining field and the field where the victim had been working. The tractor eventually traveled into a neighbors farm yard and collided with a partially disassembled combine. The farm owner heard the collision, investigated and discovered the tractor lodged on the combine. The farmer called emergency personnel who arrived shortly after being notified. They stopped the tractor and followed the path left in the fields by the chopper. They discovered the victim at the location where he apparently either fell or was thrown from the tractor. He was pronounced dead by medical personnel at the scene. MN FACE investigators concluded that to reduce the likelihood of similar occurrences, the following guidelines should be followed:

- **tractor operators should maintain safe operating speeds at all times; and**
- **tractor operators should use seatbelts when operating tractors equipped with a rollover protective structure and a seatbelt.**

INTRODUCTION

On December 14, 1995, MN FACE investigators were notified of a farm work-related fatality that occurred on October 19, 1995. The county sheriff's department was contacted and releasable information obtained. Information obtained included a copy of their report of the incident and copies of their photos of the incident site. A site investigation was not conducted by MN FACE investigators. During MN FACE investigations incident information is obtained from a variety of sources such as law enforcement agencies, county coroners and medical examiners, employers, coworkers and family members.

INVESTIGATION

The victim used a farm tractor and a stalk chopper to chop corn stalks in a recently harvested corn field. The tractor was approximately 5 years old and was equipped with an enclosed rollover protective structure cab and a seatbelt. The cab had one door for the operator to enter and exit the cab from a position in front of the left rear wheel. The door had a mechanical latch that secured it in its closed position. The cab had a large rear window that was closed and locked at the time of the incident. The tractor was equipped with dual wheels on both rear axles. The power-take-off driven stalk chopper was 22 feet wide and was hitched to the tractor drawbar.

The victim began chopping stalks in the corn field at approximately 7:30 p.m. on the day of the incident. After he had been working for several hours, he arrived at one end of the field with the tractor and chopper. At the end of the field, the victim was apparently either thrown from or fell from the tractor. He may have been run over by the left rear wheels before being run over by the operating stalk chopper. The tractor and chopper continued to travel across an adjoining field and the field where the victim had been working. They traveled in a circular direction and made five or six large circles, turning to the right as the tractor continued moving without the operator. The tractor eventually traveled into a neighbors farm yard and collided with a partially disassembled combine. The farm owner heard the collision, investigated and discovered the tractor lodged on the combine.

The farmer immediately called emergency personnel who arrived shortly after being notified. They stopped the tractor and observed that the transmission was in sixth gear and the throttle was at its highest speed position. In this mode of operation, the tractor would have traveled at a speed of four miles per hour, a typical speed for the task being performed by the victim. The emergency personnel followed the path left in the fields by the tractor and chopper and discovered the victim at the location where he either fell or was thrown from the tractor. He had sustain severe total body injuries from the chopper and was pronounced dead at the scene by medical personnel.

CAUSE OF DEATH

The cause of death listed on the death certificate was multiple total body traumatic injuries.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

Recommendation #1: Tractor operators should maintain safe operating speeds at all times.

Discussion: Tractor operators should always maintain safe operating speeds to reduce the potential of falling off or being thrown from a tractor. The tractor involved in this incident was found with the transmission shifted into sixth gear and the throttle at its highest speed position. In this configuration, the tractor traveled approximately four miles per hour. Although the operator maintained control of the tractor at this speed in the field, the speed would have been great enough to cause it to severely bounce as it crossed the end rows of the field. Severe bouncing of the tractor may have resulted in the cab door inadvertently opening and the operator being thrown from the tractor. If the tractor involved in this incident had been slowed when the operator arrived at the end of the field, the potential for the operator being thrown from the tractor would have been reduced, and this fatality might have been prevented.

Recommendation #2: Tractor operators should use seatbelts when operating tractors equipped with a rollover protective structure and a seatbelt.

Discussion: The tractor involved in this incident was equipped by the manufacturer with an enclosed rollover protective cab and a seat belt. Seatbelt usage is necessary during a rollover to ensure that the operator remains within the "zone of protection" provided by the rollover protective structure. During operation of a tractor equipped with a rollover protective structure and a seatbelt, the operator should always use the seatbelt. Except during stationary operation of the tractor, the operator should securely fasten the seatbelt before the tractor engine is started and it should remain fastened while the operator is on the tractor. Proper usage of the seatbelt will prevent an operator from either falling or being thrown from the tractor. Before the seatbelt is released and the operator dismounts from the tractor, the transmission should be placed in park and the engine stopped. If safe work practices and guidelines regarding tractor seatbelt usage had been followed in this case, this fatality might have been prevented.

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