

Public Health
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To: Carl Spurlock, PhD, Director of the Kentucky Injury Prevention
and Research Center

From: Amy Scheerer, FACE Investigator, and Tim Struttman, FACE Project
Manager

Subject: Farmer Killed When Thrown From Tractor

SUMMARY

A 79-year-old farmer (the victim) was killed while driving his tractor. He had been a full-time farmer who lived alone and farmed on the 136-acre land nearly all of his life; the main commodity was beef cattle. As was his usual practice, he was working alone on the day of the incident. Every evening he had dinner with his two sisters who lived in a house on the same property about 50 yards from his home. When he did not show up for the evening meal, they went out to look for him. They found that he had taken the tractor out on the property, most likely to check the fence line. Tire tracks through the grass showed that he had been driving the tractor along a ridge when, for an unknown reason, the tractor went off the path and down the slope to the left into a grassy meadow area. The tractor continued down the incline about 300 feet then turned uphill about 30 feet before coming to a stop. Upon arriving at the scene they found the tractor remained in fifth gear with the ignition on, but the engine had cut off. The victim was found lying on the ground in front of the tractor's right rear wheel; his right bootlace was caught around the brake pedal. His injuries and the condition of his clothes suggest that he was thrown to the right side of the tractor and had been dragged although not run over. The victim was not wearing a seatbelt. Rescue squads were called and the victim was pronounced dead at the scene. In order to prevent similar incidents from occurring, FACE recommends:

- Wear a seatbelt when operating a tractor
- Avoid wearing loose-fitting clothing when working near machinery

INTRODUCTION

On April 5, 1996, FACE investigators were informed of the death of a farmer on April 3. An investigation was initiated and a site visit was made on May 8. Prior to the visit, information about the case had been obtained via phone from the state police who had been present at the scene. Interviews were held during the visit with the deputy coroner and the victim's brother; the sisters declined to be interviewed. Photographs were taken of the tractor, but adverse weather conditions prohibited traveling to the site where the incident occurred. Copies were obtained of photographs of the scene taken by the state police. A copy of the autopsy was obtained upon completion.

The victim had been involved in farming all of his life and had lived on the 136-acre farm most of his adult life. He was a full-time farmer who worked without any hired help. He had never married and lived by himself in a home on the farmland. His two sisters lived in a house about 50 yards away on the same property; he had dinner at their home every evening. His brother lived a few miles away and they kept in close contact. The farmer had been involved in raising beef cattle and at this time had 41 head. Part of the land was leased out to raise tobacco. Over the last 10 years he had decreased the intensity of the farm work, but still farmed full-time and had been in moderately good health.

He had been involved in two other tractor-related mishaps prior to this fatal incident. One incident occurred about 15-20 years ago when he was thrown from a tractor and sustained a broken pelvis; the other was tractor rollover, with no major injuries.

INVESTIGATION

Within the last few years, the farmer had purchased several new pieces of farming equipment, including a Ford tractor (model 4630) which he was using the day of the incident. This model was manufactured between 1990-1993 and had a 55 HP engine. The tractor was equipped with a rollover protective structure (ROPS) and a seatbelt, however according to the brother, it was not the farmer's usual practice to wear the seatbelt when operating the tractor. This piece of equipment was used every day and it was well maintained.

On the day of the incident, the weather was warm and sunny. As was his usual practice, the farmer worked alone and began the day's tasks early in the morning. There were no witnesses to the fatal incident that occurred. When he did not show up at his sisters' home for dinner that evening, they went out to look for him. At about 5:30 pm they found him lying on the ground underneath his tractor in a grassy meadow area of the farm. Tire tracks indicate that he had been driving along a ridge when, for an unknown reason, the tractor and went off the left side of the path and down a hill. The tractor continued down the incline for approximately 300 feet when apparently the left rear wheel locked and the vehicle turned sharply uphill for about 30 feet before coming to a stop. The type of tools that were scattered along the hillside suggest that he was most likely going out to check the fence line on the property and make repairs. His body was found lying on the ground underneath the tractor in front of the right rear wheel; his right shoelace was caught on the brake pedal. The victim's injuries and the condition of his clothes suggest that he was thrown to the right side of the tractor and then dragged, although he was not runover. The tractor was found in fifth gear with the ignition switch on, but the engine had cut off. The victim had not been wearing a seatbelt. Emergency medical personnel were called and the victim was pronounced dead at the scene at 6:30 pm. Investigators at the scene estimated that the incident had occurred sometime in the morning.

CAUSE OF DEATH

The cause of death as listed on the death certificate and autopsy report was acute cardiorespiratory failure due to atlanto-occipital dislocation related to tractor accident.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

Recommendation #1: Wear a seatbelt when operating a tractor.

Discussion: Wearing a seatbelt while driving a tractor will keep the operator from being thrown off the vehicle while driving over rough terrain or making sharp turns and will assure that the driver remains in the ROPS protected zone in the event of a rollover. In this case, wearing a seatbelt would have prevented the farmer from being thrown from the tractor.

Recommendation #2: Avoid wearing loose-fitting clothing when working near machinery.

Discussion: Clothing should be well-fitted with no strings, loose ends, or frayed edges that can be caught in machinery. Avoid wearing boots/shoes with long laces and jackets and sweatshirts with drawstrings which can easily become entangled in the moving parts of machinery. In this case, the victim's bootlace became caught on the pedal of the tractor which resulted in the victim being unable to break free of the moving equipment.

REFERENCES

Official Guide- Tractors and Farm Equipment. North American Equipment Dealers Association; Fall 1994.

Snyder K. and Bobick T. Safe Grain and Silage Handling. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health; October 1995.