

Keep Safe on the Roads Using a Pilot Vehicle

Byline: Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

Word Count: 796

A pilot vehicle can save a lot of frustration for both motorists and agricultural machinery operators. A pilot vehicle can help prevent collisions, injuries and damage to vehicles, farm machinery, and to road infrastructure.

Every year across Canada, collisions between agricultural machinery and motorists occur on public roadways. Farm machinery is large, heavy and slow moving, and often these collisions have severe outcomes. According to Canadian Agricultural Injury Reporting (CAIR) data, traffic collisions made up roughly 7% of all agriculture-related fatalities between 2003-2012.

There are plenty of factors that lead to collisions between agricultural machinery and motorists. Some of these factors are not just limited to agricultural machinery collisions, like distracted driving or impatience. However, some are unique to large machinery and can include:

- Motorists unaware of hazards associated with agricultural machinery
- Size of farm machinery
- Slow moving equipment
- Visibility issues due to lighting, marking, or environment (sun, weather)
- Unexpected movements from motorists or from farm machinery operators
- Unseen vehicle in a “blind spot”

Many farm machinery/motorist collisions involve a combination of factors. Using a pilot vehicle can help to reduce the likelihood of incidents. Pilot vehicles act as buffers between motorists and farm machinery and alert motorists to drive cautiously before passing or driving near farm machinery.

A front and/or a rear pilot vehicle can accompany farm machinery on public roadways. Something to note is that all pilot vehicles should have the ability to communicate hazards to the equipment operator. (However, keep in mind safety concerns including distracted driving.)

A front pilot vehicle is an escort. It leads the farm machinery and warns oncoming traffic of the approaching equipment.

A rear pilot vehicle typically travels 4 to 8 seconds behind farm machinery. A pilot vehicle warns approaching motorists of the farm machinery ahead and the driver helps to monitor the farm machinery’s load (ie: trailers, hitched implements, loads like bales.) This pilot vehicle must stay in the line of sight of the equipment operator at all times.

A farm vehicle such as a half-ton truck can be used as a pilot vehicle. The pilot vehicle should use its hazard lights (4-way flashers) and it’s a good idea to use a rotating beacon to distinguish itself from regular vehicle traffic. The pilot vehicle can be operated by anyone with a valid driver’s license. All lighting and special signage on the pilot vehicle must be secured and be in good working order.

PLEASE NOTE: Some provinces have requirements for the use of pilot vehicles and others do not. It is best to check your provincial highway traffic legislation to know if there are situations in which pilot vehicles are required to be used and the specifications of those pilot vehicles to include but not limited to lights and signage.

Knowing when to use a pilot vehicle depends on the situation. Every situation is different and it is important to recognize the hazards associated with moving agricultural machinery on public roadways. Consider using a pilot vehicle in the following situations:

- Highways with no barrier between oncoming traffic
- High-speed roadways (90 km/hr or more)
- High-traffic roadways
- Oversized loads or equipment
- Slow moving machinery (40 km/hr or less)
- Adverse weather conditions
- Poor lighting situations (typically dawn or dusk)

In general, operating agricultural machinery on public roadways should be kept to a minimum and it is best to try to use side roads rather than highways whenever possible. Keep in mind that anyone operating agricultural vehicles or machinery on public roadways needs to possess a valid driver's license and must comply with their provincial highway traffic laws.

Spending some time prior to the busy season can help ensure that everyone knows how to help move the equipment when time comes. Performing a short hazard assessment before moving agricultural machinery on public roadways can reduce frustration and create safer roadways. Six short steps can help everyone who operates farm equipment to keep themselves, other motorists, infrastructure and farm machinery safe:

1. Identify the situations in your operation when agricultural machinery needs to move on public roadways.
2. Assess the level of risk to farm machinery operators and other motorists.
3. Develop and implement policies, procedures, and best practices for these situations.
4. Train farm machinery operators on the policies, procedures, and best practices.
5. Document any training.
6. Promote the application of your policies, procedures, and best practices.

Remember, before starting any move of farm machinery make sure everyone knows the plan, the route, and what to do in case of unexpected situations.

We all share the roads. It is up to all of us to do our best to safely get where we need to go. Using a pilot vehicle is one step that farms can use to reduce collisions. For more information about farm safety, visit casa-acsa.ca and stay safe!