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Farm Bureau, ODA, ODOT, sheriff promote rural road safety

MARION COUNTY, OREGON, June 19, 2019 — With the goal of keeping both drivers and farmers safe, the Oregon Department of Agriculture, Marion County Farm Bureau, Marion County Sheriff's Office, and Oregon Department of Transportation will host a press conference on Thursday, June 20 at 12:30 p.m. in Gervais to highlight the importance of sharing the road safely with farm equipment. (Get the details of press conference or follow it tomorrow on Facebook live.)

For many farmers in the Willamette Valley, summer is the busiest time of year. The harvest of vegetables, berries, tree fruits, grass seed, clover, and wheat, among other crops, is in full swing with farmers spending long hours in their tractors.

Summer harvest means that sometimes large, slow-moving equipment must travel on public roads to move between fields or from farm to field. Driving a tractor on a highway is a legal and often necessary part of harvest — but it can pose a serious safety risk for both motorists and farmers without caution, courtesy, and patience.

“We’re reminding drivers to slow down, be patient, and use caution when encountering a tractor on the road,” said Alexis Taylor, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture. “Moving equipment between farms is part of a farmer’s day-to-day life, but it can make an already dangerous job even more so. Please, let’s give them our attention and respect to keep the roads safe for all Oregonians.”

The Oregon Legislature is also poised to pass HB 3213, which will create a pilot program to allow local governments to establish safety corridors on county roads. The bill was passed unanimously by both the House and Senate and now awaits the governor’s signature.

“I was proud to introduce House Bill 3213, the Rural Oregon Achieving Driving Safety (aka ROADS) Act, this session. This bill is going to provide a tool for local law enforcement, counties, and communities to ensure that our county roads and farm roads are safe for tractors and farm equipment, and safe for our rural communities that want to get to and from home safely,” said Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis.
Farmers and Marion County Farm Bureau members Molly McCargar and Brenda Frketich were driving forces behind the legislation.

“Our rural roads are no longer being used just for getting agricultural products to market. They’re now being used as backroad commuting highways,” said McCargar. “Nearly every farmer, and non-farmer, I know who live on River, French Prairie, and McKay Roads have stories of close calls or accidents because of increased traffic. In less than a year, there have been 12 fatalities on McKay Road alone.”

“As a farmer, a first responder, a mom, and a community member, I can tell you firsthand that a lack of roadway safety is a very scary, all too often deadly scenario. My hope is that raising awareness around road safety in agriculture, and on these county roads, will save lives,” said Frketich.

Besides experiencing a few near accidents themselves while driving a tractor on the road, McCargar and Frketich lost a neighbor and fellow farmer in a deadly crash five years ago. Scott Miller served on the Marion County Farm Bureau Board of Directors and was killed in 2014 when a car rear-ended his tractor, which was pulling a trailer.

“Too many people underestimate how dangerous it is when you don’t slow down or try to pass a tractor recklessly, or even illegally over a double line or on a curve,” said McCargar. “Unfortunately, this is something farmers are seeing more every year.”

Indeed, as smartphone driving apps become the norm, more motorists than ever before are using rural roads for day-to-day travel. More people are taking advantage of the growing number of farm stands, u-pick fields, and agritourism events available. Summer is also the time when major construction occurs on interstate highways, like I-5, which can cause drivers to seek alternate routes.

As the number of cars on rural roads increases, so does the risk of serious accidents involving tractors.

According to the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), in 2017 there were a total of 42 crashes statewide involving farm equipment, resulting in one fatality and 32 non-fatal injuries. This is a significant increase from only four years ago; in 2013, there was a total of 26 crashes involving farm equipment, with no fatalities and 11 non-fatal injuries.

To help drivers share the road safely with farm equipment, Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) offers a one-minute video and a free brochure with important tips for both motorists and farmers.

- See the video on OFB’s website
  - OFB’s Facebook page
  - OFB’s YouTube channel
- Download a brochure for farmers and motorists about rural road safety
  - https://oregonfb.org/safety/
Farmers do their best to avoid moving tractors during times of high traffic. However, during peak harvest, when the fruit is ripe or the hay is at the optimum level of dryness, they may have no choice.

Most farm equipment is designed to travel at speeds of no more than 25 miles per hour (mph), and must display a triangular, orange-and-red, reflective, slow-moving-vehicle sign if going out on public roads.

It takes only about 5 seconds for a car driving 55 mph to travel the length of a football field. A tractor driving 25 mph that looks far away can be directly in front of a fast-moving car within seconds. In low light, it can be even more difficult to judge the distance.

Safety tips for drivers include:

- If you decide to pass farm equipment on the road, please do so with caution.
- Be watchful of vehicles behind you that may also try to pass.
- If you must enter the oncoming lane of traffic, do not proceed unless you can see clearly ahead of both your vehicle and the vehicle you will pass.
- If there are any curves or hills ahead that may block your view or the view of oncoming vehicles, do not pass.
- Do not pass if you are in a designated “No Passing Zone” or within 100 feet of any intersection, railroad grade crossing, bridge, elevation structure, or tunnel.
- Do not assume that a farm vehicle that pulls to the right side of the road is going to turn right or is letting you pass. Due to the size of some farm implements, the farmer must make wide left-hand turns. If you are unsure, check the operator’s hand signals and look at the left side of the road for gates, driveways, or a place the vehicle might turn.

Safety tips for farmers include:

- Oregon law requires a slow-moving vehicle reflector on any machine that travels the road slower than 25 mph. Always point the triangle up, keep the SMV emblem clean to maximize reflectivity, and replace the emblem when it fades, normally every two to three years.
- Mark the edges of tractors and machines with reflective tape and reflectors. Consider installing retrofit lighting to increase visibility.
- Turn on your lights, but turn off rear spotlights when going onto the road. From a distance, spotlights can be mistaken for headlights.
- Be aware of heavy traffic patterns.
- Consider installing mirrors on equipment so you can see motorists around you. Be careful where the mirrors are placed.
- When moving multiple farm implements down the highway, leave enough space between each vehicle for cars to pass.

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About Oregon Farm Bureau: Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) is a grassroots, nonpartisan, nonprofit, general farm organization representing the interests of farming and ranching families in the public and policymaking arenas. First established in Oregon at the county level in 1919 and the state level in 1932, Farm Bureau is organized in all 36 counties. OFB President Sharon Waterman is an OFB Hall of Fame.
honoree and operates a Century Ranch raising sheep, cattle, and timber in Bandon. She is OFB’s 16th president.