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Safety Watch: Attention to surroundings makes shared roadways safer

By Stephanie Leonard

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Flashing amber lights improve visibility of farm equipment during daylight hours.

Photo courtesy Stephanie Leonard

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Last month, I was driving to Dubuque, wondering if I would see first-hand a highway crash involving passenger vehicles and a farm implement. The possibility was too real in light of a recent local tragedy: A 55-year-old farmer making a left turn from a county road died after his tractor was struck by a tractor-trailer.

We were on scenic, two-lane Highway 1 in rolling country. My vehicle was the eighth behind a northbound combine.

The first vehicle behind the combine was in the “No-Zone” — the dangerous area around large vehicles that includes blind spots where smaller vehicles are hidden from the operator’s rear-view mirrors.

I hung back and followed the 20-mph caravan for maybe 2 miles. Some of the vehicles, ignoring the double yellow lines and no-passing signs, swung across the center lines, looking for an opportunity to pass the combine or string of vehicles ahead.

The drivers ahead of me appeared oblivious to the possibility the combine might make a left turn at a one of several farm lanes, field entrances or an intersection. Or that someone might come head-on over the next rise.

The combine operator was doing what he could to safely get from point A to point B: the flashing amber lights were on; he was as far to the right side of the roadway as he could be without being on a narrow and potentially dangerous shoulder; he used his right turn signal well ahead of his intended intersection. The signal lights worked and the Slow Moving Vehicle sign was visible and intact.

I wondered, had any of the drivers following him popped over one of the hills while distracted — by a cell phone, reaching for something, or looking elsewhere — suddenly to find 20-mph traffic in front of them?

Brian Egel, who farms and custom bales near Nichols, considers himself lucky to have escaped injury in roadway near misses.

On the first occasion, he was driving his tractor home from an implement dealer when a semi attempted to pass him. The semi’s dog-tracking trailer struck the rear left tire of his tractor and broke off his extended left mirror.

In the second incident, he was hauling two wagons of beans to town when his back wagon was rear-ended by a car whose driver was talking on a cell phone.

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The third time, he was driving an older tractor and started a left turn into a hay field. A pickup behind him pulled out to pass and hit his baler.

Those experiences shook him up and heighten his caution whenever he drives farm equipment on hard surface roads.

“It made me a little paranoid about being on the highway,” he said. “I’m always checking my rear-view mirrors for somebody coming up on me fast or making a passing move. I put my turn signals on way early.”

He’s also made some equipment and safety lighting upgrades.

“My newer baler has lights and turn signals that coordinate with the tractor,” he said.

He installed a wide auxiliary light bar to the back of his cab that extends beyond the sides of the baler to improve visibility of the tractor when he’s pulling implements. With the addition of these swing-out lights, drivers on the road will see two sets of flashers.

“I told my dealer I’d like to see them make bigger lights, but he said these meet the current equipment standards,” he said. “I’m probably going to put extra lights on my other towed equipment because SMV signs aren’t enough. I’d like to put a sign on the back that says ‘I MAKE LEFT TURNS!’”

The Iowa DOT recommends farm vehicle owners and operators go beyond minimum lighting and marking requirements (available at <http://tinyurl.com/d9s52xo>) to make farm vehicles as conspicuous as possible to approaching traffic. Iowa State University’s Center for Transportation Research and Education suggests that flashing yellow lights get better response from motorists than SMV emblems.

Driving defensively, eliminating dangerous distractions, increasing visibility and using safety belts can lower the risk for collisions and injury on rural roads and hopefully make the drive a lot more enjoyable for everyone.

As for the combine operator on Highway 1, I bet he was relieved to get off the highway given what was going on behind him. I was glad he made it safely off and didn’t have to make a left turn.

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