

Safety Watch: Equipment and workspace checks kick off the season

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Before planting season begins, be sure to clear the area around you when checking, preparing, maintaining, repairing or driving equipment.

Photo courtesy Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

You're ready for planting season, but is your equipment?

Some farm equipment requires daily checks, and these tasks are likely muscle memory, especially if you grew up watching Grandpa maintain the tractor.

You probably didn't see him grab for the operations manual, though, which comes with all the machinery used on the farm.

At busy times, the work area may have been cluttered and a little unorganized.

Extraneous hazards may go unnoticed on your farm until an injury or fatality occurs. Before planting season begins, consider checking your equipment and your workspace.

Before beginning maintenance, the operator's manual should be readily available. If the physical copy is lost, online options are typically accessible.

To ensure the safety of your workspace, it is important to train farmhands on protocols set forth in the manuals and communicate about routine check-ups occurring in the shop.

When performing maintenance on your tractor, planter or any other equipment, be sure to lock out electrical panels so they are inaccessible to others while working on equipment.

Stop the tractor's engine, disconnect the power source, and wait for all movement to stop before working on it. When completed, ensure everyone involved has stepped away from the machine before starting it up again.

Tidy up

Another key to safely preparing for planting season is maintaining a tidy workspace, whether that be on or around your equipment, or in your shop. Proper and accurate maintenance keeps vehicles running safely and helps you meet farm productivity goals.

Be sure to clear the area around you when checking, preparing, maintaining, repairing or driving equipment. The same principle should be observed in the physical workspace to maintain a safe, hazard-free environment.

Stepping over tools on the ground every day slows you down, and tools left without safety shields pose a risk of injury. Be sure to keep the area neat and organized and reinstall any protective shields that have been removed.

The work area should be brightly lit, with contained, separate spaces between protective clothing, electrocution hazards, welding materials, pesticides and other chemicals. Organizing your workspace allows you to maximize efficiency and safety.

There is lots to get done on the farm, and working with dangerous tools is commonplace. Rushing through maintenance tasks could cause an injury that impacts the whole season. Injuries can happen in the shop if farmers are not adequately trained on shop safety procedures.

Avoid shop injuries by taking your time, slowing down, and selecting the right tool for the job.

Doing good, safe prep work while in the machine shed will prevent equipment from breaking down in the field. Conducting machinery

repairs in the field rather than in the shop can create a new set of safety challenges — oftentimes, the shop is a more controlled environment than the field, so you are better shielded from hazards like wind or moisture.

Outside work

Outside, before working on machinery, be sure to turn off and stabilize the equipment, as a destabilized machine could tip and cause a farmer to be pinned down or crushed.

Farmers tend to work alone and may not tell fellow workers where they will be at certain times of the day, which creates a major safety risk if an accident were to happen.

As you prepare for planting season, consider developing a communication plan to keep all employees aware of each other's locations. Designate what tasks need more than one person and have a process for checking in on workers completing tasks alone.

Hazard symbols (pictograms) can quickly communicate safety hazard information about chemicals or a piece of equipment. Red “danger” signs posted to equipment notify of deadly hazards; orange “warning” symbols represent hazards that can result in death, again, or injury; yellow “caution” symbols indicate that the hazard can lead to a minor or moderate injury. Take note of these symbols and associated hazards surrounding you before interacting with machinery.

Make your life a bit easier and clean off the windows of your vehicle every day (especially in the event of weather conditions like snow or ice) to protect yourself from an often-neglected hazard — a dirty windshield.

Fuel when the engine is turned off and cool, never smoke while fueling, clean up all fuel spills immediately and discard wet rags to one section of the shop. While these tasks may seem tedious, they could be the difference between a lasting injury or safely completing the day's work.

Planter check

Now, your planter has its own set of pre-operational checks to consider before the season. Walk around the machine, look for broken or worn parts, and replace them if found. Replace worn planter chains if needed. Look for rusty or unmovable chain links that will cause uneven, stop-and-go operating in the field.

Disc openers should cut "V"-shaped furrows, and "W"-shaped furrows reveal that the disc opener is worn down. Examine the shape of your seed tubes for any leaks or cuts to the seed tubes and clean the seed tubes to prepare for planting and make sure your planter is level.

Finally, remember to review the operator's manual, as this article is only a short overview of equipment safety. Managing every machine is different and requires individualized maintenance prior to planting season.

By taking the time to properly prepare your workspace and equipment, you're doing your part to ensure a safe, prosperous growing season.

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