

Iowa Farmer Today

Tractor fire a reminder to be prepared

By Tabitha Kuehn

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A tractor burns after it caught fire while disking a field last May.

Photo courtesy of I-CASH

Tractors and combines are essential for the modern farmer, but equipment fires pose safety, financial and emotional risks all year long. I recently spoke with a farmer friend about a tractor fire he experienced last spring and the ways the fire is still affecting him now amid harvest season.

Back in May, my friend, who requested I not use his name in this article, was preparing a field to be seeded as pollinator habitat for one of the NRCS programs. It was a very windy day, and this particular field was pretty rough, which made for a bumpy ride. Admittedly this was not his favorite task, but the field needed to be disked before it could be seeded, so he hopped into one of his favorite tractors, a John Deere 4430, and got to work.

Things carried on as normal until he spotted orange flames and smoke coming from underneath the dash in the front of the cab. Right away, he got out of the tractor and threw some dirt on the fire to try and smother it — he had put out a small fire on a combine this way in the past. Unfortunately, the dirt wasn't enough to stop the fire that was spreading quickly with the help of a strong back wind.

The farmer called his son and the fire department, and then stood back and watched as the fire moved to the fuel line and began to engulf his tractor.

Over four months have passed since that tractor fire, but the farmer is still thinking about things he could've done differently. The blaze was likely caused by a loose wire that was jostled and ignited as the tractor drove across the bumpy field. My friend thinks about how the fire could have been potentially avoided if he had checked the wiring more frequently and fixed the wire before using the tractor.

One of his biggest regrets is that he did not have a fire extinguisher on the tractor. If he had, he thinks the fire could have been put out within a few moments. He also thinks about how it had been a while since the

tractor was last pressure washed, and oil buildup and crop residue might have helped fuel and spread the flames.

Even though he has regrets about the situation, my friend also reflected on moments he made good choices.

“When it really got going, the glass exploded. If I had been standing near it, that would’ve been terrible,” he said.

By getting out and moving away from the tractor, he protected himself from physical injuries, but he still faces emotional pain when recalling the incident. Losing the tractor was tough. The tractor had been around his farm since the late ’70s, and it was his go-to for jobs like haying and cultivating.

The fire also created stress that he is still dealing with today. Handling insurance claims, deciding whether to try and salvage and repair the tractor or replace it, and dealing with an increasing workload through the summer and fall without a heavily utilized piece of equipment all burdened the farmer in the aftermath of the fire.

My friend is not the only farmer who has experienced a tractor or combine fire, and the dry conditions that Iowa has recently experienced elevate the risk of more fires occurring.

Machine maintenance and inspections are important steps in preventing farm equipment fires. Tractors and combines need to be routinely cleaned of crop residue, fuel and grease. Loose plant material needs to be cleared away from heat generating sources, and machinery should be stored away from furnaces and other sources of heat and sparks. Maintenance checks should include inspecting the exhaust system, electrical components, bearings, belts, and chains. If any leaks or degrading components are observed, they should be replaced or fixed with manufacturer or dealer parts and recommendations.

Every machine should have at least one fire extinguisher, and it is ideal if the machine is equipped with two — one mounted in the cab and one that can be reached from the ground. Fire extinguishers need to be fully charged and the pressure should be checked monthly. When using a fire extinguisher, aim at the base of the fire, sweep side to side, and maintain a safe distance from the fire.

Operators should only attempt to fight a fire themselves after they have exited the cab, called 911 and determined it is safe to do so. The safety of the farmer is the No. 1 priority, and although the tractor was severely damaged, my friend and his family are glad that he was not injured from his tractor fire experience.

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