

Iowa Farmer Today

ROPS a proven strategy to keep old tractors safely running

By Brandi Janssen

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An International 1466 tractor in Plymouth County, Iowa, before and after ROPS installation. In addition to the ROPS, the owner added a canopy and steps with a hand rail.

Photos courtesy I-CASH

Despite what some outside the Midwest might think, there really is no “typical” farmer. You can find growers of crops ranging from paw paws to carrots to soybeans. Some farmers have a few head of heritage-breed livestock, others a few thousand hogs.

One thing they all share is tractors, and many likely have a pre-1985 tractor still in regular use. This commonality matters because it’s also likely that a tractor built before 1985 lacks a Rollover Protective System (ROPS), which includes a rollbar and a seat belt, that could save a life if the tractor rolls over.

Tractor rollovers remain a leading cause of deaths on farms in Iowa and nationwide. Data from the New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health shows Iowa leads the nation in tractor overturn deaths, accounting for 12% of all rollover deaths.

The consequences of a rollover can be dire for both the farmer and the farm. One in seven operators involved in a rollover is permanently disabled and 70% of farms that lose a farmer to a tractor overturn go out of business within five years.

However, when used correctly with a seatbelt, ROPS are 99% effective in preventing injury or death in the case of a rollover. The protective frame of the ROPS stops the operator from being crushed, and the seatbelt keeps the operator from being thrown from the tractor.

Starting in spring 2020, Iowa’s Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (I-CASH) dedicated a limited amount of funds to partner with the National ROPS Rebate Program, based in Cooperstown, New York.

The program funds about 70% of the cost of purchase and installation, with an out of pocket maximum cost of \$500 for the farmer. Those who work with the hotline receive guidance on the program and where to find a ROPS for their tractor. After final receipts and proof of

installation are submitted, the farmer receives the rebate by direct deposit.

When we started in 2020, there were more than 50 Iowa farmers on the waitlist for funding. When funding was offered to them, many had already used their own finances to retrofit, had sold the tractor, or no longer needed the funding for other reasons.

Since we began, I-CASH has invested over \$30,000 in 27 counties to retrofit 34 tractors from the original waitlist with this lifesaving technology.

The farmers who have taken advantage of the program so far reflect the diversity of the state, including crop, livestock and produce growers. Sixty-five percent report being part-time farmers, and farm sizes range from 20 to 1,600 acres. Of the livestock farmers, most report having cattle, along with a couple of goat and sheep farmers. Herd sizes range from only 2 cattle to 200.

Most farms have more than one tractor, and two farms have 12. In addition, 15 already have at least one tractor with ROPS, and six of those have previously retrofitted another tractor.

Finally, five farmers report having experienced a serious incident on their tractor, and, I'm glad to note, 75% report that they will always use the seatbelt when operating the retrofitted tractor. These tractors will be put to use for an average of 14 hours of operation per week.

I'm not making any product endorsements, but the vast majority of the retrofits have been to John Deere tractors. The oldest reported machine is a 1961 3010, though an undated Ford 861 would have been built sometime in the 1950s. We've also helped retrofit a number of Internationals and a couple Olivers.

Fortunately, ROPS can match your red, green or blue color scheme pretty easily.

Farmers who participate in the program can opt to install their own ROPS, or take it to a dealer for installation. While you're installing the ROPS, it's a good time to add other safety features such as a canopy for sun protection or steps with a handrail.

Older tractors without rollover protection contribute to numerous fatalities every year. We are glad to be able to make a proven, lifesaving strategy more accessible to farmers.

I-CASH will continue to keep at least some funding for the program available as long as there is demand. It will take some time, but I hope that we can make every tractor in our state as safe as possible.

For more information about the rebate program, visit www.ropsr4u.org.

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