

Iowa Farmer Today

SafetyWatch: Keep safety in mind when mowing ditches

By Brandi Janssen

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Be alert for hidden obstacles and debris when mowing along roadways.

Photo courtesy Brandi Janssen

Late summer is the season for lots of roadside attractions: fresh sweet corn by the dozen, tomato stands, and tractors out mowing ditches.

Iowa law prohibits mowing ditches in most cases between March 15 and July 15 to protect habitat for ground-nesting birds and pollinators.

If you can hold off mowing for a couple more weeks, the benefits for wildlife increase. According to the Iowa DNR, about 21% of pheasant nests are still active on July 15, but that number drops to 7% by Aug. 1.

Whenever you decide to start managing ditches along your fields and property, there are a number of important safety considerations. First, think about your equipment.

While a trusty brush hog may work fine for open spaces and shallow ditches, its centered position behind the tractor may require you to drive unsafely on steep slopes. An offset flail mower can be positioned off-center while being towed. This will allow you to get around embankments and drop offs while keeping the tractor on level ground. Some models will tilt 65 degrees below level to reach down banks and 90 degrees above level to fold for easier transport.

Watch for debris

Be alert for debris along roadways. If the terrain is rocky, you will already know to be on the lookout. If you mow in an area that tends to gather litter, take a quick walk-through to remove anything that could damage your equipment or become a dangerous projectile.

Again, the type of mower you have might make a difference. A brush hog is a rotary mower, with horizontal spinning blades. This means

that a rock or other debris can be forcefully thrown out in any direction from under the mower deck by a blade.

For any type of rotary mower, double row chain guards can help reduce the risk of flying debris.

A flail mower cuts with y- or t-shaped flails that rotate around a shaft oriented parallel to the ground. The blades cut and shred vegetation, holding it under the mower until material has gone through the blades several times. There is less opportunity for debris to be ejected from under a flail mower.

Road safety

Although you may think that you are highly visible to drivers passing you on the road as you mow, a distracted driver may not see you or realize the difference between your speed and theirs. It is very important that you are as visible as possible to auto drivers.

Recently approved standards developed by the American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers (ASABE) require lights to be installed on large rotary cutters by the manufacturer. You should make sure that all tractor and mower lights are in good working order, that your Slow Moving Vehicle emblem is clearly visible, and install reflective tape along implements that are more than 3.7 meters wide or that extend more than 1.2 meters to the left or right of the tractor.

Double check that your mower does not block any of the lighting, turn signals, or reflective material on the tractor.

Rollover safety

The most catastrophic outcome would be a tractor rollover, something that occurs all too often. Take extreme caution when mowing slopes.

Only mow with a tractor equipped with a Roll Over Protective Structure and seatbelt. And make sure you use the seatbelt, which will keep you in the protective zone of the ROPS.

Remove, or at least lower, front end attachments such as loader buckets and increase rear tractor tire spacing.

Drive slowly and avoid quick turns, coming down slopes forward in low gear and backing up slopes when possible.

It's worth noting that Iowa does allow hay mowing and harvesting in state highway right of way areas after the July 15 deadline. You do need a permit to do this, but it's free and available on the Iowa DOT website.

Landowners on adjacent property must also sign off, and mowing should occur between the hours 30 minutes after sunrise and 30 minutes before sunset to ensure that it occurs in full daylight.

This permit is required for any mowing in the state highway right of way. Contact the DOT representative in your region for help with this process.

Ditch mowing is an annual ritual in our agricultural calendar. Take the appropriate precautions, wait for wildlife to do their thing, and check if you need a permit. When you're done and home safely, cook up some sweet corn — you deserve it.

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