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Safety Watch: ATVs not made for roadway, even when state laws allow

By Brandi Janssen

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Take extra precautions if you have to use an Off-Road Vehicle on the road during agricultural work.

Photo courtesy Brandi Janssen

There are lots of choices when it comes to All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs), Utility Task Vehicles (known as UTVs or side-by-sides) and Recreational Off-Road Vehicles (ROVs). But they are collectively designated as Off-Road Vehicles (ORVs), and for good reason. They're really designed for recreational trails and backwoods operation.

But ORVs have become a common piece of equipment on Iowa's farms and are useful in both crop and livestock production.

For the most part, ORVs are restricted to off-road use in Iowa, but there are some legal allowances for using them on public roads. Some counties allow limited recreational use on designated roads, and the state allows ORVs on public roadways for occupational purposes. This occupational exemption includes surveying and transportation work as well as agricultural tasks.

Operators must have a valid driver's license, and the work must be between sunrise and sunset. In addition, the vehicle should not exceed 35 mph during roadway operation.

Rules of the road

Even though roadway use of ORVs is limited in Iowa, over 60 percent of all ORV fatalities occur on roadways, and 43 percent of those deaths happen on unpaved roadways.

The cause is not always other vehicles; the majority of roadway crashes involve only the ROV.

Charles Jennissen, a clinical professor of emergency medicine and pediatrics at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, researches ROV-related crashes and injuries.

“Even though it is legal to drive on Iowa public roads for agricultural work, farmers should avoid doing so whenever they can,” he notes.

ORVs are simply not designed for roadway use. Their high center of gravity and narrow wheelbase make them highly prone to rolling over.

In addition, their knobby tires do not operate on pavement in the same way as car tires. The tread grips in unpredictable ways, reducing traction on road surfaces and making it extremely difficult to regain vehicle control once lost.

They’re also often equipped with a locked rear differential, which means that the wheels turn at the same speed despite the inside wheel covering a shorter distance. That affects turning radius, requiring a wider and slower turn than an automobile.

Jennissen says, “Following the laws alone will not keep you safe. Taking extra precautions is critical.”

For example, even when following the law and operating only during daylight hours, ORV drivers should go to extra lengths to be visible to other drivers.

Gerene Denning, an adjunct professor of emergency medicine at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, also researches ORV safety.

“The law used to require a safety flag, but that requirement disappeared. A safety flag is an important safety feature,” Denning says.

Safety flags should be fluorescent orange and be displayed at least 5 feet off the ground. The researchers also advise the use of a Slow Moving Vehicle (SMV) emblem on side-by-sides, such as gators.

Operators can also be more visible by wearing brightly colored clothing and helmets and by purchasing brightly colored ORVs. Helmets are not mandated by Iowa law, but they are essential safety precautions. Jennissen and Denning have found in their research that helmet-wearers were 80 percent less likely to suffer a head injury in the case of an ATV crash.

Common-sense driving

Speed is another consideration. Although the law mandates that ORVs should be operated at less than 35 mph, Jennissen cautions that this may not be slow enough.

“Although the maximum speed one can travel is 35 mph when driving on the road for farm purposes, this speed is often too great to maintain vehicle control,” he says.

Roadway curves are especially precarious.

“The most important thing is to slow down well in advance of a turn of curve so it can be negotiated without losing control. This is often much slower than many operators realize only too late,” Jennissen says.

Good defensive driving is a must if operating on roadways. Be especially attentive in places where you may be less visible, such as intersections with tall corn or as you come around a curve. And, don’t forget to use caution when you pull out of driveways and farm lanes onto the road. Drivers may not expect to see you on the roadways.

You might wonder if driving in the ditches is a safer option. It could be, but it’s only legal to drive in ditches that are adjacent to your own property.

Common agricultural tasks, such as pulling a trailer or carrying a spray tank, can also increase the risk of a crash.

Jennissen says, “Towing with an off-highway vehicle adds a lot of complexity to safely driving on roadways. Pulled items can jack-knife or sway which can lead to loss of control.”

Carrying a spray tank changes the center of gravity, increasing the likelihood of a rollover. The sloshing of liquid in the tank further destabilizes the vehicle. Denning recommends checking the owner’s manual for the maximum weight of loads on the front or rear rack of the vehicle.

Finally, remember that ATVs are designed for one rider only. Even though Iowa law allows for passengers when doing agricultural work, Jennissen cautions, “Never carry passengers on

ATVs, even though the law allows it if you are doing farm work. It increases the risk of loss of control and subsequent injury.”

Utility vehicles and side-by-sides can accommodate multiple riders, but you should never carry more people than seats and seatbelts, which should always be buckled.

Off-Road Vehicles are an important tool in agriculture. But, like many other pieces of equipment, they come with a number of risks. Following the law as well as best safety practices will help keep you safe if you have to use your machine on the road.

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