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Agriculture Injuries and Deaths Captured in Press Clips

While media reports of agriculture injuries and deaths do not provide comprehensive data about the prevalence of such events, press clippings do help researchers track, categorize and better understand work-related deaths and non-fatal injuries in production agriculture, according to investigators with the UI Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health.

In 2002, the center began collecting press clippings to augment its understanding of agriculture-related accidents. In 2007, that effort was expanded to include all nine states in the center's region, including Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

"We are very much a regional center with partners throughout the nation, but especially in the nine-state region," said Wayne Sanderson, director for the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. "We hope that the data we collect will be useful to our partners and will spark intervention projects to reduce accidents and injuries."

Data collected from some other sources, such as farm equipment crashes investigated by the highway patrol or farm employee deaths from the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, has limitations.

"We generally get more detail from press clips, such as names, age and sex of the persons involved and a description of how and where the accident occurred and the equipment involved. This information is often missing from other databases," Sanderson said.

The press clippings data are a unique source for non-fatal injuries, said Murray Madsen, associate director for the center and trauma investigator for the Iowa Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation program. This information is not tracked or not tracked well in any state in the center's nine-state region.

While Madsen readily acknowledged that press clippings provide only an incomplete picture of the problems, he noted it offers a clear picture of the major issues that deserve continued attention.

"One cannot look at the press clippings and fail to see the loss of farmers who overturn tractors, are runover, are engulfed in flowing grain, or are mauled by livestock," Madsen said. "And, you cannot miss the toll of injuries to drivers and passengers in the thousand or so motor vehicle crashes with farm equipment each year."

The media reports underscore the need for greater attention when operating tractors and machinery, which account for nearly three-quarters of fatal incidents and three-quarters of non-fatal incidents reported in clippings.

Tractor overturns, a longstanding concern, account for about 40 percent of fatal and nearly 12 percent of non-fatal tractor-machinery injury events reported in clippings. Retrofitting cab-less tractors with roll-over protective structures, phasing them out of high risk uses, or modernizing the fleet are solutions, according to Madsen.

Runovers by tractors and machinery account for nearly 18 percent of machinery- and tractor-related deaths reported in clips. While that includes incidents where the operator or passenger falls or a bystander is hit, there continues to be reports of operators engaging in the dangerous practice of starting the machine from the ground.

Clippings also help document collisions between farm equipment and motor vehicles. Collisions account for 49 percent of the tractor or machinery-related non-fatal clips. More movement on rural roadways by farmers and rural commuters has made collisions a rising concern, Madsen said. He believes increased road-safety campaigns may result in fewer collisions.

“It’s a bit of my own passion to be sure as we continue to seek data that provides a meaningful picture of the problems, supports actions to make improvements, and helps to measure progress,” Madsen said.

The Great Plains Center, one of 10 agricultural health centers across the United States funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, is based in the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health within the UI College of Public Health.

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