

Farmer Champions Awareness For Improved Roadway Safety

While driving down U.S. 24 in his tractor, Daryl Hodel, took one final look over his shoulder. Beyond the large wagon he was towing, he saw his wife, Deb, driving behind him in a pickup. Two semis loomed behind in the distance.

With his turn fast approaching, Hodel flipped on his left turn signal to warn the oncoming semis not to pass.

Yet the trucks weren't slowing down.

Back in the pickup, his wife realized the trucks had no intention of slowing. She immediately called her husband and warned him not to make the turn.

Hodel heeded the warning. Shortly after hanging up his cell phone, the semis barreled past and overtook them both.

"The trucks just blew right by," Hodel remarks. "If I had made the turn, I wouldn't be here today."

Situations like this are a common occurrence for farmers who often put their lives on the line when transporting their slow-moving farm equipment along rural roadways. This is especially true during fall, which is a peak time for harvest activity.

According to the COUNTRY Financial farm death survey, five Illinois farmers died from roadway collisions involving farm equipment from July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2009. Two farmers were attempting to turn left. This type of roadway accident is the second leading cause of farm deaths.

To heighten awareness, "Rural Roadway Safety—Alert, Aware and Alive" is the theme for National Farm Safety and Health Week, Sept. 20-26.

Hodel, a COUNTRY Financial client who owns a 2,200-acre farm located near El Paso in Woodford County, also wants to boost roadway safety awareness. He has been working with the Illinois Farm Bureau to petition manufacturers to improve farm equipment signaling devices.

According to Hodel, inadequate signal lights on the back of farm equipment could be a major cause of accidents involving farmers making left turns.

"All of the flashers and blinkers are yellow. We need a set of red blinkers with arrows to show we're turning," says Hodel. "Oftentimes, drivers don't even realize these farming vehicles are turning, which causes them to pass the machine at unsafe times."

He believes an independent blinking signal in the shape of a directional arrow would provide much improved visibility for rural drivers. So far, farming equipment lacks a distinctive, arrow-shaped turn signal. However, progress is underway.

Recently Hodel and other Woodford County Farm Bureau members proposed the signal idea to the Illinois Farm Bureau Resolutions Committee.

“Subcommittee members agreed the current signaling system is inadequate,” says Kevin Rund, IFB senior director of local government. “However, they decided the proposal required additional investigation into making it more cost-effective to farmers and manufacturers.”

In the meantime, Hodel knows farmers and motorists share equal responsibility for roadway safety.

“Drivers need to keep their distance and remain patient. We don’t always turn at normal places. We need to swing right before turning left because our equipment is so large. Most importantly, motorists should make sure to always closely watch farm equipment’s signals.”