

Safe Tractor Starting Procedures

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Every year there are tractor operators that are killed when they attempt to start a tractor while standing on the ground, instead of from the operator's seat. In 2009, two New York farmers were killed when their tractors started in gear and bolted ahead, running them over. When starting a tractor always be seated in the operator's seat.

Most tractors have a safety start system where the gearshift must be in the park position or neutral and the clutch must be depressed in order for it to start. Newer tractors may also have a switch in the seat that keeps the tractor from starting unless the operator is sitting in the seat. Never bypass or disconnect any safety start systems. It is important to note that there are many older tractors still being used that do not have any of these safety start features.

Never bypass start a tractor. Bypass starting is usually performed because of mechanical problems with the tractor's ignition system. Instead of taking the time to properly repair the faulty system, an operator may stand next to the tractor and attempt to manually bypass the tractor's ignition switch causing the engine to start. Older tractors that are left in gear can lurch ahead resulting in the operator being crushed by the rear tractor wheel. For many years now, tractors have come equipped with bypass starter covers that prevent bypass starting.

Never attempt to start a tractor while standing on the ground. This is sometimes done when tractors are being used as stationary power sources. It may seem quicker to just reach up and turn the ignition switch rather than climb up on the tractor. However taking that shortcut might cost you your life if the tractor should suddenly jump ahead because it was started while in gear. Remember, the safe way to start a tractor is by climbing into the operator's seat, making sure the tractor is in park or neutral.

Safe tractor operators always follow proper tractor starting procedures. Safe tractor starting procedures include the following steps:

- Perform a thorough pre-trip walk-around inspection of the tractor. Look for fluid leaks and check fluid levels. Check the condition of the tires. Make sure that the area is clear of people or objects before starting and moving the tractor.
- For tractors operated on public roadways, check to make sure that the SMV emblem is in place. SMV emblems should be centered in the back of the tractor, 2 to 6 feet off the ground. They should be clean and not faded.
- If the tractor is indoors, make sure that the building doors are open before starting the engine.
- Make sure that the operator's area is free of any tools, equipment or debris. Make sure that any steps are clean and not covered with mud, manure, or grease that could cause slips when climbing onto the operator's platform.

- Face the tractor and use three points of contact when climbing into the operator's area. Use any available handholds and steps.
- Adjust the seat so that you can comfortably reach all controls. If your tractor allows adjustments, tilt the steering wheel as necessary. On cab tractors, adjust any mirrors that might be present.
- If the tractor is equipped with ROPS, fasten the seatbelt.
- Ensure that the gear shift is in neutral or park before turning the key. Depress the clutch pedal.
- After starting, check to see that lights and flashers are operable.

Everyone at your farm who operates tractors should follow these safety procedures. For inexperienced operators, take the time to make sure that they are adequately trained to operate tractors safely. NYCAMH can deliver free tractor safety training (as well as training on any other agricultural safety topic) to New York farms. These services are offered at no cost by a grant from the New York State Department of Labor Hazard Abatement Board. For more information, please contact Jim Carrabba, Agricultural Safety Specialist at (800) 343-7527 extension 239, or e-mail jcarrabba@nycamh.com. NYCAMH, a program of Bassett Healthcare Network, is enhancing agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury and illness.