

Transportation Safety for Farmworkers

By Anna Meyerhoff

Bilingual Farm Safety Educator

The New York Center for Agricultural Medicine & Health – NYCAMH

Each year nearly 50,000 people in the United States lose their lives in motor vehicle incidents and nearly 2 million are injured. Migrant and seasonal agricultural workers may work in multiple fields, orchards or other remote locations and need transportation to “commute” to and from the worksite, sometimes two or three times a day. They may be transported by labor contractors, pay “raiteros” for rides, or drive their own vehicles. Unfortunately, there have been multiple incidents in which vans and other vehicles were involved in serious incidents resulting in death and injury to farmworkers. Here are some quick tips for keeping workers safe.

Be especially careful when using 15-passenger vans to transport workers.

According to statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), there were 1,090 deaths between 1997 and 2006 in incidents involving 15-passenger vans. Out of these incidents, 680 involved rollovers. Due to their relatively high center of gravity, these vehicles can have an increased tendency to roll over, especially with improperly inflated tires, inexperienced drivers, or excess cargo or passengers. These vans handle very differently from smaller vehicles because they are typically longer, higher, and wider. They require additional reliance on the side mirrors for changing lanes, more space, and additional braking distances.

Do not allow more workers than the vehicle is designed to carry.

NHTSA studies show that the risk of rollover for 15-passenger vans dramatically increases as the number of passengers increases from fewer than 5 to more than 10. Ensure that each passenger in the vehicle has a seat and working seat belt.

Use only safe, well-maintained vehicles to transport workers, and inspect the tires and check tire pressure before each use. Do a pre-operational check of the vehicle before use, and be sure to check the tires for tread and proper inflation. Excessively worn or improperly inflated tires could potentially cause a loss of vehicle control or even a rollover. Pressure for front and back tires may be different, and pressure is likely higher than that required for car tires. The owner’s manual lists manufacturer recommended tire size and pressure.

Only allow licensed workers who understand traffic laws to drive.

Under the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (MSPA), drivers of vehicles used to transport workers must have a currently valid driver’s license to operate the vehicle, as required by law. If state law requires a commercial driver’s license (CDL) to operate a given vehicle, for example, the driver must possess a valid CDL in order to drive it. Additionally, farm labor contractors (FLC) and farm labor contractor employees (FLCE) who drive farmworkers must have and carry a doctor’s certificate stating that they are qualified to operate the vehicle and have no diseases or impairments that are likely to interfere with safe driving. They must have adequate vision and hearing, be able

to distinguish red, green and yellow, and not be addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Drivers who need glasses must wear them at all times when operating a vehicle. These and other requirements help keep farmworkers safe by ensuring that drivers are properly trained and able to safely operate transportation vehicles.

Use appropriate speeds and slow down for slopes and rough areas.

In addition to weather conditions, uneven terrain such as service roads, ditches or embankments in fields can cause vehicles to become unstable and increase the potential for an overturn. Only go as fast as conditions allow, and reduce speed when traveling over rough ground or on slopes. It is best to slow down and drive cautiously, especially on rural roads. Reduce speed to below the posted speed limit for turns and poor road conditions. The posted speed limit is safe for cars, NOT large vehicles such as 15-passenger vans, which have a longer stopping distance.

Pay attention to light, weather and road conditions while driving.

Poor driving conditions can cause an incident to occur. Wet roads, heavy rain, glare, blowing wind, snow, fog or hail are all factors that affect the driver's visibility as well as the vehicle's response time and stopping distance. Drive as slowly as needed in order to keep passengers safe. Always drive defensively, watching for hazards and obeying traffic signs.

Information in this article was obtained from a fact sheet about transportation and the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, which is available at the US Department of Labor Wage & Hour Division website. To read more about these regulations, visit: <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs50.pdf>. For more complete information regarding MSPA, call the DOL WHD toll-free helpline at 1-866-4USWAGE (1-866-487-9243). Additional information used to compile this article comes from NHTSA's Top Safety Recommendations for 15-Passenger Van Use, available at: www.safercar.gov/staticfiles/safercar/Passenger%20Van%20Safety/vanfansheet.pdf.

NYCAMH offers services that can help your workers stay safe and help your farm with audit requirements. We offer free on-farm trainings in English and Spanish on a variety of topics including: Worker Protection Standard, personal hygiene and safe food handling, packing house safety, and CPR and first aid certification. To schedule, please contact me by calling 1-800-343-7527, ext 291 or email ameyerhoff@nycamh.com. NYCAMH, a program of Bassett Healthcare Network, is enhancing agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury and illness.