

By LuAnn Schindler

For farmers, the harvest season represents the culmination of the life cycle.

Primary-colored giants race in slow motion, picking rows of corn or soybeans, dust swirling, casting a haze across withering fields.

Tractors haul loaded grain carts. Semi-trailers and grain trucks stretch like a slithering snake at elevators, inching forward, waiting to deposit harvest's remnants.

At our house, harvest translates into 24-hour days filled with regular dairy chores and multiple rounds in the combine or tractor.

It's cause for celebration; we outsmarted weather patterns and avoided drought.

But, harvest also causes concern for farmers across the state.

Traffic increases on usually-serene roadways. Even at our corner, where the country road either morphs into an unbeaten path, curves into our driveway, or rounds eastward, congestion crops up. Is anything worse than a bottleneck along the section line?

Other drivers become impatient with farmers and their tortoise-paced machinery. The swerve-and-gun-it driving maneuvers boost the chances of a costly crash.

Farmers grow weary from the late-night/early-morning routine. A lack of sleep leads to a lack of alertness. Response times decelerate; poor judgment ensues.

Equipment jams. Grain shifts in a bin. Tractor mirrors block a clear view.

In a world comprised of Murphy's Law scenarios, farm safety needs to take precedence, not only during harvest, but throughout the year. Too often, we become ultra-relaxed and take an invincible attitude that leads to accidents.

Approximately 25 Nebraskans suffer personal injuries each year in farm-related accidents. The Department of Highway Safety reported one farm fatality in 2008; three people were killed in farm accidents in 2007. With a state population of 1.78 million individuals, that number may not seem significant.

The 2007 Agriculture Census lists 47,712 farm operations in Nebraska. That averages out to one accident per approximately 2,400 farms.

You still may think that's a small number, until an accident involves a family member.

My grandfather was involved in three separate farm accidents. Back when a two-row corn picker was the rage, the machine clogged. Grandpa tried to unclog it without shutting off the picker. He ended up losing part of his index finger and all the skin off his thumb.

Years later, he tangled with the auger that transferred corn into the bin. This time, he lost part of a pinky.

The last incident happened when a piece of wood splintered and struck his eye. He lost his peripheral vision.

We grandchildren were never allowed to ride in the combine or on the tractors until we reached a mature age. Even when my 3-year-old daughter asked her great-grandfather if she could ride in the combine, he firmly said "no."

Once, a couple of us surfed the corn in the corn crib. Grandpa busted us and cautioned that we shouldn't be in the building because corn could shift and pull us under.

He expected us to be safe because he experienced loss and realized the pain associated with accidents.

He wasn't being mean.

He was pro-active.

He was grateful for surviving.

We listened.

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