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Harvest Safety

Harvest time. That time of the year when we get to see the fruits of our labor in the form of a harvested crop. It gets a romanticized depiction in paintings and photographs and even videos. It looks like it's a lot of fun – and it is. It's also high stress and dangerous.

The 2019 harvest season will likely be characterized to some degree as a waiting game. Crops are maturing behind schedule, potentially causing a greater overlap in corn and soybean harvest windows. Weather has been anything but predictable this year, and will likely be a factor at some point during harvest season as well. What can we do to be as safe as possible?

Start by checking equipment. A Nebraska Extension Educator that has served for over 35 years as a firefighter and EMT shared last fall about his department's discussions this time of year as fire calls increase due predominantly to combine fires. Residue buildup around engine and exhaust systems and concealed drive belts and pulleys are huge. Taking a little extra time to make sure harvest residue is cleaned off and out of machines is a huge first step towards avoiding fires. Take a peek at electrical systems. Problem areas can spark, igniting grain dust, crop residue, or fuel vapors. If you haven't initiated preventative maintenance yet – do so now.

There are also some relatively simple steps you can take to help in case preventative maintenance doesn't do the trick. Start harvest operations on the downwind side of the field. If a fire occurs, the flames will be pushed towards the harvested portion of the field, reducing potential damage. Carry a cell phone – and know what level of service you may have as well as how to compensate for service issues in case of an emergency. Knowing field location is extremely important, not only for you, but for the entirety of the harvest crew. Field locations should be able to be relayed to emergency personnel using local road numbers and letters.

Have three fire extinguishers ready: one in the combine cab, one accessible from the ground, and one in a piece of equipment or service truck nearby. If you do get a field or equipment fire, don't hesitate to use it, but call 911 first.

Road safety is important as well. Think about the number of times you pull that combine out of a field and move it to another. How many vehicles do you encounter? Do you have working flashers, lights, and adequate slow moving vehicle signs? It may seem logical for those of us in an agriculture community to slow down when we see a semi with flashers on following a slower moving combine. That slow moving vehicle may only be another obstacle to pass on highway for someone who doesn't understand.

Having a plan cannot be stressed enough. Lots of moving parts make up a harvest operation. Combine. Tractor and grain cart. Semi. Auger. Grain Bin or Elevator. All have their own moving parts and hazards. Have a plan to make sure that all are operated safely and that plans are in place should an accident occur. We don't like to think about it, but we need to.

Take care of yourself. Sleep should not be replaced with one more energy drink. Meals shouldn't be reduced to a simple candy bar or skipped altogether. Take time on a regular basis to stop, stretch, and move around. Taking good care of yourself physically will also help you stay more alert and can help prevent you from making unsafe or time wasting mistakes.

Harvest *should* be an enjoyable time of the year. It's great to have it romanticized in magazines for the world to see. It can be both of those, so long as it's done safely.