

Farmers most likely to die on job

WALLA WALLA, Wash. (AP) — Bill Cline remembers thinking he should sharply turn the wheel of the combine after its motor stalled, the hydraulic controls failed and it began to roll backward down a hill near Dayton.

"Something happened," said Cline, 28. "The combine took off down the hill and I was on the ground."

Cline suffered broken ribs and a dislocated shoulder, but Cline was lucky. He lived to tell about the accident.

The National Safety Council concludes that farmers and other agricultural workers are more likely to die on the job than any other category of American worker.

About 1,200 people died and 140,000 were injured in farm-related accidents in the United States last year, the council reported.

So far this year, six people have died in farm accidents in Washington state including Ian Hoyle, a Scottish teen-ager who died Aug. 16 on a farm northeast of Walla Walla.

The fatal accident is being investigated by the Washington Department of Labor and Industries.

"Farming in itself is not a routine job," said Bill Symons, a Washington State University agricultural engineer. "There's always a little bit of unexplained things that happen."

Farmers must try to stay attentive even though they work long days on a combine or tractor that can lead to fatigue and inattentiveness.

Harvest is a particularly stressful time, Symons said.

"Physically, all hell breaks loose with you" when the slow pace of summer shifts into a higher gear and crops must be brought in quickly, he said.

Harvest also puts added mental strains on farmers and farm employees, Symons said.

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— Bill Symons,
Washington State engineer

"It has to happen, and it has to happen now," he said. "We're working with something that's perishable and don't realize that we're as perishable as it is."

Washington state farmers have good safety records when compared to those elsewhere, in part because they tend to use better equipment, he said. In addition, more are experienced, full-time farmers who don't hold second jobs.

But accidents still happen. David Carey still doesn't know what caused a combine wreck on his farm that killed 19-year-old Terri Moeller, an experienced driver, in 1990.

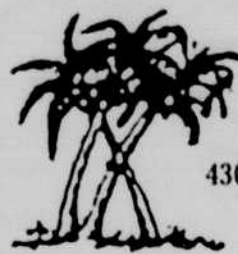
The combine was taken apart after her death, but Carey said no failed parts were found that could have caused the accident.

"There was no reason," Carey said. "That gives you a real empty feeling when you can't find an answer."

Since that accident, Carey has used combines with larger wheelbases that are more stable on hill-sides.

Fatal accidents serve to make people more aware of farm safety, at least temporarily, he said.

"Everybody sits up and takes notice," Carey said. "But then people start slipping into complacency again."



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