NIOSH AWARDS FUNDING TO AG RESEARCH CENTERS FOR INITIATIVE
TO REDUCE TRACTOR DEATHS, INJURIES

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has awarded $504,000 to a consortium of university-based agricultural safety and health research centers across the U.S. The funding under a two-year NIOSH grant will help the centers build their capacity to launch a national public health campaign for preventing deaths and serious injuries from tractor overturns and other tractor-related incidents.

The funding will allow the NIOSH-supported Centers for Agricultural Disease and Injury Research, Education, and Prevention and the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety to fill current gaps in their knowledge base and to explore new techniques to promote safer tractor use. Tractor overturns, runovers, power takeoff (PTO) entanglements, and collisions with non-farm vehicles on public roads are the leading cause of death and serious injury in U.S. agriculture. On average, more than 250 farmers, family members, and farm employees die annually in such incidents, half of them when a tractor overturns and crushes the operator.

Although no official statistics are available, University of Kentucky researchers estimate that 4.46 non-fatal injuries from overturns occur for every fatality. These injuries are often severe and disabling. They also can be financially devastating, with immediate and long term medical expenses and the loss of family farms when an owner-operator is incapacitated.

Technological means, including rollover protective structures (ROPS), exist for preventing death and injury from overturns. When used with seatbelts, ROPS have proven effective at virtually eliminating fatalities and serious injuries. However, more than half of the approximately 4.7 million agricultural tractors in the U.S. lack ROPS.

“We are pleased to support this initiative, which enables the centers to join in an unprecedented team effort on this compelling public health issue,” said NIOSH Director John Howard, M.D. “Finding effective ways to promote tractor safety is a tremendous national challenge to which we and our partners are bringing new resources.”

“By 2007, building on the results of this effort, we will be in a good position to seek the involvement of all the stakeholders affected by tractor injuries and fatalities: farm and safety groups, equipment manufacturers and dealers, government agencies and legislators, educators and outreach specialists, and most importantly, farmers, ranchers, and their families. Together, we can make a difference,” said Steve Reynolds, PhD, CIH. Reynolds directs the High Plains Intermountain Center for Agricultural Health and Safety at Colorado State University, which will lead the initiative.

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Under the newly funded initiative, the centers will:

- Study the costs of injuries from farm tractor overturns and highway collisions and identify who bears those costs.
- Assess the impact of changes in ROPS standards, regulations, and technology and their effect on future ROPS availability.
- Examine the acceptability of, and procedures for, financial incentives to retrofit tractors with ROPS.
- Create a database of potential partners to help guide the planned national campaign and launch an intranet to facilitate communication about tractor safety among the centers.

The most ambitious of the projects, involving eight of the 10 centers, will test community-based social marketing in 36 venues across the U.S. Social marketing seeks to influence behavior to benefit the intended audience.

“We are eager to see if we can use some of the techniques developed in the last few decades to ‘sell’ tractor operators on safer practices,” Dr. Reynolds said. “Unless we can begin changing attitudes and behavior, we are not going to solve this problem.”