

FINAL KY FACE #94KY05901

Date: 26 August 1994

SUBJECT: Farmer Dies After Being Run Over By Tractor While Checking Gas Wells

SUMMARY

A 64-year-old male farmer was killed when the tractor he had been operating rolled onto him. The victim had completed his morning rounds on his farm when he apparently got off his tractor while on a steep slope. The victim walked in front of the tractor for an unknown reason. The tractor rolled forward, pushed the victim down and rolled over him. The victim was crushed by the weight of the tractor. The coroner estimated time of death at 7:00 am on Friday, June 3. The victim was found by his son on Sunday, June 5 at 11:40 pm.

- Parking brakes should be applied when the vehicle is stopped.
- Wheels should be chocked when parking on a sloped terrain.

INTRODUCTION

On Friday morning, June 3, 1994, a 64-year-old retired farmer died after the tractor he was operating rolled onto him. On June 6, 1994, the county coroner contacted the Kentucky FACE investigator to inform him of the incident. On June 30, 1994, the FACE investigator traveled to the scene to conduct an investigation. The tractor and incident site were photographed. The coroner's photographs and report were reviewed. The incident was discussed with the county coroner as he accompanied the investigator to the scene. The victim's widow and daughter were also interviewed.

The victim was a retired farmer. He owned the tractor involved in the incident and the 81 acre farm where the incident occurred. Family members indicate he spent most of his time growing a vegetable garden and maintaining gas wells on the property. He had not grown tobacco or raised cattle in about 8 years. He monitored his natural gas wells once and sometimes twice a day. He had no prior accidents on his tractor.

The victim had owned the 1970 Ford Workmaster since 1973. It was not equipped with Roll Over Protective Structures (ROPS) or a seat belt. It did have a brush guard attached to the front. The tires were air filled. The brakes worked adequately when depressed by the investigator.

INVESTIGATION

The victim's routine was to get up before dawn, drive his tractor up a hill behind his house and inspect the eight natural gas wells on his farm. The hill behind the house sloped 22 degrees. The tractor path was grass and rock leading directly up the hill. The victim often used this path to reach the wells. An alternate route is available but is much longer and was rarely used by the victim.

On the morning of the incident the victim's wife was out of town. However, she reported the victim always left the house before dawn to make his one and a half hour rounds to check the gas wells. No one was at the house on the morning of the incident. The victim was found heavily clothed suggesting he left early in the morning.

Having completed his rounds, the victim drove the 1970 Ford tractor back down the hill toward his house. In order to keep the tractor from going too fast down the hill, it was the victim's habit to put the engine in first gear, turn the engine off and roll down the hill slowly, using the gears to hold back the unit. About 100 feet from the top of the hill the victim stopped the tractor and apparently got off. It is not known why he got off the tractor. (The hill continues for another 75 feet before it levels out.) Evidence suggests the tractor then began to roll. The victim was pushed down by the tractor and it rolled onto him. Because the incident was not witnessed, the sequence of events is inferred.

The victim was found by his son 64 hours later supine between the front wheels under the axle and brush guard. His right femur was angled across his chest and the axle rested on the anterior aspect of his tibia. The victim's son called EMS who then contacted the county coroner. The coroner arrived at the scene at 11:50 pm. The victim was taken to the funeral home. An autopsy was not done.

The tractor is estimated to be 24 years old. It was inspected by the coroner the day following the incident. It was driven on the same hill of the incident, the engine was stopped and transmission left in first gear. The tractor rolled four feet and stopped. The four foot distance would have been enough to roll onto the victim if he was standing in front of the tractor.

The FACE investigator measured a 16 inch distance from the brush guard and front axle to the ground. The hood was off and looked to be in average condition for a tractor of this age. The front and rear tires were spread an equal distance and were air filled. The brakes worked when depressed by the investigator.

CAUSE OF DEATH

The coroner listed the cause of death as position condition asphyxia due to the weight of the tractor.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

Recommendation #1: Apply parking brake when unit is stopped.

Discussion #1: When a vehicle is stopped on level or sloping terrain, the parking brake should be applied. In this case it is not known why the operator got off the tractor mid-hill. If the parking brake had been applied, this may have prevented the tractor roll and subsequent injury.

Recommendation #2: Wheels should be chocked when on sloping surfaces.

Discussion #2: In this case the operator got off the tractor on a steep hill. Assuming the tractor held ground while he got off, a rock placed in front of the wheel may have prevented the unit from rolling down hill.

DISCUSSION

The case was largely circumstantial in nature. Since it was not known why the victim got off the tractor, more specific recommendations are difficult to draft. An autopsy was not done, making it difficult to determine if some prior health problem contributed to the incident.