



HAZARD ALERT

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Tobacco Harvester Safety Requires Patience and Proper Training

An increase in the number of fatal and near-fatal accidents has occurred with the increase of mechanization in tobacco harvesting in North Carolina. The following two cases are actual examples of preventable accidents involving mechanized tobacco harvesters on North Carolina farms.

- **Fatality in 2014:** A farm employee was asphyxiated when his body was pulled into the defoliators of a tobacco harvester while he was trying to remove clogged stalks from the machine.



Harvester defoliators



Demonstration only (Not actual injured worker).

- **Injury in 2008:** While trying to unclog the conveyor belt on a tobacco harvester, a farmworker's body was pulled into the machine. He was found unconscious and not breathing but survived due to immediate and expert medical attention.



Harvester conveyor belt



Demonstration only (Not actual injured worker).

Note: Many operators are under the false assumption that only the “tipping head” or “cutter bars” can kill or seriously injure a person. These actual cases clearly demonstrate that ALL moving parts of the harvester can be dangerous. Operators must make sure that ALL moving parts have stopped before getting off the harvester.

Remember: Both of these preventable accidents involved a choice to save time rather than to follow proper operational procedures, resulting in tragic outcomes. As the survivor of the 2008 accident explained, “I knew better. You can get by with using short cuts a lot of the times, but it doesn’t take but one to get injured or lose your life.”

What’s the bottom line? An increase in mechanized tobacco harvesting has increased exposure to the very serious hazards associated with these machines. Death or serious injury is likely to occur without safe work practices.

Why the increase in mechanized harvesting? Machine harvesting cuts costs. According to N.C. State University’s Department of Agricultural Resource Economics, labor costs

account for about 23 percent of the total estimated cost per acre of hand-harvested flue-cured, tobacco. Comparatively, labor costs for machine harvested tobacco account for about 6 percent. (Bullen, Fisher, Weddington, NCSU, 2009)

Are accidents preventable? Yes, employers must train employees on safe harvester operations as prescribed in the operator’s manual for the specific harvester to be used. In addition, employers must implement measures to ensure safe work practices are followed.

The following are examples of operational procedures found in operator’s manuals for tobacco harvesters. These procedures will vary, depending on the manufacturer and harvester used.

BEFORE Operating

- Ensure the operator’s manual is on hand and the operator is familiar with its contents.
- Ensure that the operator presence and neutral start systems are functional before starting the engine.
- Ensure that all the controls are in the neutral or off position before starting the engine.
- Ensure everyone is clear of the machine when starting the engine and during the time of operation.
- Never start or operate the engine in an unventilated, closed area.

AFTER Operating

- Stop the engine and do not smoke while refueling.
- Allow radiator to cool before checking the fluid. Turn the cap slowly to release pressure.
- Check local and state government regulations if you wish to transport the machine on a road or highway. Safety devices, lights and warnings not furnished with your machine may be required.
- Never tow the machine.
- Chock wheels while parking or storing.
- Make sure that the forklift rests on the positioning latches when it is in the raised position.
- Lower the rear forklift and headers when not in use.
- Lower headers onto a suitable support before disconnecting any part of the header or header lift systems.
- Lower the forklift to its lowest position before adjusting the cable.



WHILE Operating

- Do not get on or off the machine while the engine is running. Wait for **ALL** machine movement to stop **before** **dismounting**. **Never attempt to adjust, lubricate, clean or unclog any part of the machine while the engine is running.**
- Do not allow riders on the machine at any time for any reason. The operator is the **ONLY** authorized person.
- **NEVER** operate the machine while the operator presence sensing switch or any other safety device is inoperable. **NEVER override the operator presence sensing switch to save time.**
- Keep hands, feet, hair and clothing away from all moving parts.
- Drive the machine at speeds compatible with good safety practices. This is especially important when operating over rough ground, on slopes, crossing ditches or while turning.
- Never drive the machine on the road while a trailer is attached.
- Keep all shields and guards in place when operating.
- Use a piece of cardboard or wood instead of your hands and wear eye protection when checking for hydraulic leaks. Hydraulic fluid escaping under pressure can penetrate the skin. If oil is injected into the skin, it must be surgically removed within hours or gangrene may result.