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TOP STORY

Mowing mistakes on slopes can claim lives, limbs

By Stephanie Leonard Jul 24, 2019 Updated 38 min ago



Zero-turn mowers are designed for use on slopes no greater than than 15 degrees.

Photo by Stephanie Leonard

Picture this: It's early evening. A man is mowing a wide lawn that fronts the highway in rolling farm land.

He's perched on the left edge of the seat — the high side — mowing across the side hill where the ditch meets the shoulder, the right wheels of the mower are in the ditch. His hips are cocked to maintain some contact with the seat.



His back is to us, the rural traffic passing alongside him.

I came upon this scene a week ago, and it rattled me when I saw it ahead and slowed to pass alongside.

Was he trying to get the job done and over with, aware of the risk of a rollover on the sidehill? Of how precarious his position was on the edge off the seat? Or had he done this a hundred times and wasn't worried?

I debated going back to talk with him after I was down the road a ways. I could have said "I was worried about you ..."

Overturns, runovers, projectiles

Perhaps because mowing's so routine, it's easy to take the hazard for granted.

That is, until you count the recent accidents that have claimed lives in Iowa and neighboring states:

- July 10: Gary Lee Jungjohan, 78, was mowing a road shoulder in Sutherland, Iowa, when the tractor he was operating rolled into the ditch on top of him.
- June 30: Loren Tungesvik, 64, was mowing a steep ditch in Hamilton County when the mower tipped over and pinned him.
- June 5: Larry Last, 78, was mowing in a field in Hardin County when the tractor's front tire struck a washout; the tractor overturned and pinned him.
- June 4: David Rausch, 72, was mowing near a retaining wall in Cold Spring, Minnesota, when the mower went over the wall, landing on him. He died June 7.

And there've been recent nonfatal injuries, some involving children:

- June 5: A 3-year-old girl in Hawkeye was seriously injured when she was backed over by a lawnmower.
- May 31: Bryan Brice was rescued after being pinned under his mower when it rolled over an embankment in Darlington, Wisconsin. He called for help with his phone before becoming unable to breathe.
- May 15: A 2-year-old boy was injured when he was backed over by a lawnmower in Rock Island County, Illinois.
- May 15: A 4-year-old boy in New Madrid County, Missouri, lost part of his foot, caught in the blades when he jumped from his mother's lap while she was mowing.

In 2018:

- William Fricke, 54, died when the lawnmower he was operating near a creek bed tipped over and pinned him in Lincoln, Nebraska.
- A 12-year-old Iowa boy died in Buchanan County when the mower he was operating rolled back down an incline and pinned him after he had shut off and dismounted the machine.
- A 10-year-old girl in Douglas County, Minnesota, survived injuries, including a cracked skull, after she was struck between the eyes by a section of lawnmower

blade that sheared off when the mower her father was operating ran over a tool in the yard.

- Deane Matchey, 63, died after the mower she was operating on a hill rolled over and pinned her in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin.

Dangerous scenarios

Nearly all these preventable fatalities and injuries share themes of predictable risks that result in loss of stability or contact with blades. They include:

Mowing on sidehills or slopes steeper than what the mower or tractor is designed for. Most residential tractors and mowers are designed for slopes no more than 15 degrees (no steeper than 1-foot rise for 4-foot horizontal run).

Mowing along or near embankments or shoulders. One side of the tractor or mower is lower, decreasing stability and increasing risk of rolling over, or one wheel of the mower or tractor drops off, causing the rollover.

Mowing banks along ponds and creeks. The first 6 to 10 feet of turf near water is often waterlogged, increasing the risk of overturns when the mower sinks in or slides on the bank.

Operators unprotected by use of rollover protection (ROPS) and seatbelt, designed to provide a protective zone from being pinned or crushed if a rollover occurs.

Mowing when others are within range of run over objects that can be thrown by spinning blades.

Kids riding on mowers with family members. Kids can slip, fall or jump off and be run over.

Kids playing near or approaching mowers. They're not seen by parents or operators who can't hear them and don't look back before putting mowers in reverse.

Do you recognize yourself in these scenarios?

If the answer's yes, then I'm worried about you, too. Take into consideration the prevention tips to mow safely and protect yourself and others you care about.

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MORE INFORMATION



Mowing reminders