

Inspectors from Commercial Vehicle Safety Enforcement and WorkSafeBC safety officers conduct an inspection on a vehicle used to transport farm workers.

Transporting farm workers safely

By Gord Woodward

Transporting agricultural workers to and from their worksites can put them at risk of injury due to vehicle collisions, rollovers, and other incidents. Follow these tips to help reduce the risks.

During a shift, farm workers may have more than one workplace — one of which may be on wheels. Vehicles that transport workers to or from work are considered workplaces, and have their own hazards and potential for risk. As employers, farm labour contractors are responsible for the safe transport of their workers.

One of the biggest safety issues is maintenance and repairs, says Mike Nielsen, a Prevention Field Services manager with WorkSafeBC.

“We continue to see a lot of mechanical deficiencies,” he says. Of the 20 vehicle inspections that have taken place so far this year, 12 violations cited mechanical issues and 6 resulted in vehicles being placed out of service. Commercial Vehicle Safety Enforcement (CVSE), which partners with WorkSafeBC to conduct inspections, says the majority of defects encountered

by its inspectors are related to braking systems, tires and wheels, steering components, and lighting.

Other common risk factors are speeding and drivers who don’t have the required qualifications.

These factors can lead to a variety of incidents — all with potentially serious consequences. Farm workers have been injured when the vehicle transporting them crashed, rolled over, or collided with another vehicle. They’ve been hit or run over while standing near a vehicle loading or unloading. And they’ve been injured when the vehicle moved suddenly before everyone was seated or had buckled up their seatbelts.

Employers are responsible for workplace safety, even when the workplace is a vehicle. This starts with hiring qualified drivers and ensuring all workers are properly trained. Employers also need to have a thorough maintenance program to ensure vehicles are in safe driving condition.

Five tips to reduce the risks

Here are some ways to reduce the risk when transporting farm workers to and from a worksite:

1 Perform regular mechanical checks and maintenance

“Make sure the vehicles are in sound operating condition by performing regular maintenance,” Nielsen advises. Older vehicles and vehicles that get a lot of use may require more frequent upkeep due to wear and tear. Every vehicle needs a comprehensive mechanical review at the start of the season as well as regular maintenance with a check sheet at scheduled intervals set by the carrier.

2 Inspect the vehicle before and after every shift

“Use a checklist for pre-trip and post-trip inspections,” says Nielsen. Perform a thorough inspection of the vehicle with a check of all items on the list, including brakes, tires, steering, seats and seat belts, exhaust, and lights. If you come across any defects that might compromise the safe operating condition of the vehicle, immediately tell your supervisor and don’t proceed with picking up any passengers. Also remember to give your trip inspection report to your employer within the required 20 days.

3 Only qualified drivers should get behind the wheel

Drivers need to have the right license classification for the work at hand. Note that some drivers may need a Class 4 license.

Only drive if you’re well-rested, alert, and are familiar with the vehicle you’ll be operating. “It could be as simple as knowing where the jack is stored in case of a flat tire,” Nielsen says. Make sure you know your responsibilities as a driver, which include the following:

- Ensuring first aid kits and fire extinguishers are always available in vehicles
- Following posted speed limits
- Ensuring every passenger wears a seat belt if the vehicle is equipped with seat belts
- Correcting unsafe conditions immediately and reporting them to your supervisor

4 Ensure you’re trained in vehicle inspection and safe operation

Health and safety training for drivers includes how to perform pre- and post-trip vehicle inspections, what to expect while on the road, and where to go

for help if something with the vehicle isn’t right. Your employer should provide annual refresher training courses to keep drivers current.

If you encounter language barriers during training, visit worksafebc.com to find free health and safety resources in a variety of languages. Also consider calling on translators if necessary.

5 Know your limits

As a driver, follow the safe seating capacity of the vehicle as stated by the manufacturer. Don’t overload the vehicle. Ensure that each passenger has at least 41 cm (16 in.) of seating space.

As a passenger, be sure to use your seat belt at all times if the vehicle is equipped with them. Get in and out of the vehicle safely using a good handhold. Don’t create distractions for the driver. If there are any safety issues, such as the smell of exhaust, report them right away to your supervisor or employer.

WorkSafeBC, along with the CVSE and Employment Standards, will be conducting unannounced inspections of vehicles transporting farm workers throughout the summer. You can avoid delays and disruptions if you keep your fleet of vehicles in good operating condition.

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— Mike Nielsen,
Prevention Field Services manager

For more information

Visit worksafebc.com/agriculture for a variety of free health and safety resources for agriculture, including information on an employer’s responsibilities for providing a safe workplace.

For information about commercial vehicle safety rules, regulations, and training, visit cvse.ca. ☺