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## PRESS RELEASE

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

*By UNMC, Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health, Omaha, NE*

### **DON'T TORCH YOUR COMBINE**

***Simple maintenance can greatly reduce your risk.***

Fire in a combine is the last thing farmers want to encounter during harvest.

While fall fires can't be totally eliminated, a few precautionary steps can greatly reduce the likelihood that fire will ignite inside in your combine or the field you're harvesting.

"As a 38-year volunteer firefighter and Emergency Medical Technician, I know an uptick in fire calls occurs every fall," John Wilson, retired University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Educator, says. "If you didn't get your combine thoroughly cleaned out after last year's harvest, make sure you clean it before going to the field this year. One of the main causes of combine fires is accumulated residue that ignites when a combine belt or pulley heats up due to friction with crop residue. It takes time to do a thorough cleaning but having a combine fire in the middle of harvest is about as bad as it gets."

Depending on how much residue builds up in the combine during harvest, cleaning it periodically through harvest is also advisable.

Thorough maintenance should include adequate lubrication and greasing ALL grease zerks as it's easy to miss one here and there. Inspecting wiring will help reveal any hazardous damage to wiring insulation that requires repair or replacement.

"Damaged wires can be an ignition source for dust or accumulated residue," Wilson says. "Also, you don't often see sparks coming from a combine exhaust. However, installing a spark arrester on the combine exhaust system is an inexpensive step to prevent that hazard."

Before it's time to go to the field, it's advisable to have two fire extinguishers in the combine. One should be in the cab. The other should be located in an area where it can be accessed from the ground. For extra fire insurance, carry a fire extinguisher in the semi cab or tractor cab used with the grain cart.

Before you need an extinguisher, inspect it to verify it's been serviced and is ready to use. If your extinguisher needs servicing, it may be just as economical to replace it rather than service it.

Before fire breaks out, it's also helpful to review the steps for using it to extinguish a flame.

"PASS is the acronym I learned when using an extinguisher," Wilson says. "To use the extinguisher, pull the safety pin and aim it at the base of the fire. You don't want to shoot over the top of the fire or in the middle of the flame. Aiming at the middle can cause flames to push outward and add to the flame rather than putting it out."

After aiming the extinguisher at the base of the flame, squeeze the handle to discharge the contents. As it empties, sweep back and forth along the base of the fire. Pull, Aim, Squeeze and Sweep.

Fires that occur during refueling a combine are not common, but they do happen. Farmers shouldn't hesitate to turn off the combine engine and give it about 15 minutes to cool before they start refilling it. This practice is easy to sidestep but doing so could result in great loss to equipment, crop and human life.

"Shutting off that engine is one of the key practices for avoiding a combine fire," Wilson says. "Of course, if you smoke, don't do it during refueling."

An often-overlooked harvest precaution is the practice of having a tractor and disc nearby to help manage fire in a field.

"Many farmers may not recognize the value of having a tractor hooked up to a disc in a nearby field or in a grassy waterway in an adjacent field," Wilson says. "However, if fire breaks out in the field during harvest, having the equipment close by allows for quickly creating a fire line and protecting a standing crop and harvest equipment."

Wilson suggests that farmers consider start harvesting crop starting on the downwind side of a field. If a fire should occur, the wind will push the fire away from the standing crop.

"If the field is hilly, it's helpful to start on top of the hill and work down because fire will race uphill much faster than it goes downhill," Wilson says. "It's helpful to do everything you can to protect standing crop."

While virtually every farmer carries a cell phone, some fields may be in areas where reception is poor or not available. Because fire spreads so rapidly in a tinder-dry field, the few seconds required to call for help could make a great difference in the amount of damage or loss to crop and equipment.

"Before you go to the field, be sure you can provide specific location details to the 911 dispatcher if you need to call for help," Wilson says. "It's not uncommon to have difficulty to provide an address or specific directions to some fields. When an emergency occurs, the heat of the moment may make it difficult to come up with county road numbers or other important landmarks."

Regardless of where a field is located, call 911 if fire breaks out. Even if the smell or sight of smoke is coming from a combine, calling for help, which may take time to arrive, is the first important step.

Keeping your distance from a smoking combine or one that's on fire may be challenging but could save your life.

“If you smell or see smoke, you need to know where it’s coming from,” Wilson says. “If you see flame, you need to be within 15 or 20 feet of the fire to use a fire extinguisher. That’s why it’s important to get fire trucks on the way. Often, firefighters with protective clothing and a large volume of water can do a much better job of preventing or putting out a combine fire.”

If the operator smells smoke or sees smoke coming from the combine, it’s helpful to take the machine out of the field or to a grassy waterway whenever possible to avoid setting residue or crop on fire. If that means driving the combine a half mile to reach the road, it may not be feasible or safe to do so.

“Always err on the side of caution,” Wilson says. “It’s better to lose equipment than to be injured or lose your life.”

Due to significant drought in 2020, many fields in the region are seriously dry, setting the stage for fires during harvest.

“This year, it’s possible that heat from a catalytic converter on a vehicle could set grass on fire,” Wilson says. “Sparks of any kind right now could result in a major fire. The first step is to do a thorough job of cleaning and maintaining your combine. That will greatly reduce the potential for problems down the road.”

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