

ATVs: fun that can kill

by Theresa Whalen

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ATV stands for all-terrain vehicle – a small four-wheeled vehicle with balloon-like tires that is designed for use on rough, unpaved ground. By design, ATVs are “driver active” where the operator sits on a saddle-like seat, and steers with handlebars, similar to a motorcycle or snowmobile. On “driver active” vehicles, the operator’s body movements help control the steering and direction, requiring a strong combination of skill, good judgement, attention, and physical strength. ATVs are used for recreation, business, agricultural and hunting purposes.

“The problem is that people don’t seem to realize how dangerous ATVs can be,” says Dean Anderson, Chair of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) and President and CEO of the Ontario-based Farm Safety Association. “They are a lot of fun to drive – but they are not toys. Unfortunately we are seeing far too many injuries and fatalities on ATVs and many are due to improper use and disregard for common sense safety.”

Anderson’s comments are in support of this year’s Canadian agricultural safety campaign theme “*PPE only works if you use it!*” with a focus on the use, fit and access of personal protective equipment (PPE) in agriculture. The yearlong campaign was launched last March with Canadian Agricultural Safety Week.

Studies from the industry organization World of ATVs report that during the first month of operating an ATV, an inexperienced operator is 13 times more likely to have an incident than someone who is experienced. It is the owner’s responsibility to ensure that young or inexperienced operators receive proper instruction prior to operation. For more information, a free booklet “ATV Safety For Agricultural Workers” is available at <http://www.farmsafety.ca/manuals/manual-atv.pdf> (42 pages pdf file, 0.5 MB).

PPE is an important part of the safe operation of ATVs and here are a few key points to ‘live’ by:

- Always wear a helmet.
- Never ride double on an ATV that isn’t designed to carry a passenger. Most ATVs are designed for only one person – the driver.
- Driver (and rider when appropriate) should also wear protective clothing such as gloves, long pants and goggles.
- Become familiar with the land you are driving on by driving slowly and checking for trouble spots in the terrain such as roots, rocks and dips.
- Never use drugs or alcohol while operating or riding an ATV.
- Laws regulating the use of ATVs on public roads vary by jurisdiction. Check with local authorities before riding an ATV on public roads.

The question of what age to let children operate ATVs is always contentious and regulation of ATVs varies from province to province. In Ontario, children under 12 are not supposed to operate an ATV on public property unless they have adult supervision. But there are no rules if the child is on private property owned by the vehicle’s owner.

Manitoba allows children under age 14 to operate an ATV with adult supervision. In Alberta, children under age 14 can't use an ATV on public property unless they are supervised by an adult. There are no restrictions for use on private property. However, in British Columbia, there are no regulations governing ATV use for kids.

Some safety proponents point to rules adopted in Quebec and Nova Scotia as potential models for other areas. Nova Scotia legislation says ATV drivers must be at least 14 years old, unless they are in a closed course, have completed training and have supervision, among other restrictions. Quebec's legislation prohibits children under age 16 from operating ATVs unless they have completed a competency course on a youth model ATV.

In 2007, the Canadian Institute for Health Information reported that hospitalizations related to off-road vehicles rose 66 per cent in the nine-year period ending 2004-2005. Males between ages 15 and 19 suffered the largest proportion of ATV related injuries, followed by those between 20 and 24.

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