Off-Road Vehicles and Train Tracks Make for a Deadly Combination

Byline: Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

Anyone who has spent time on a farm knows how popular off-road vehicles like ATVs and UTVs are for completing everyday tasks around the farm. Whether transporting farm supplies, checking on remote locations, or delivering meals to workers in the field, off-road vehicles are essential around the farm — not to mention a fun way to enjoy the outdoors.

But while smaller in size than other farm equipment, it's still important to adhere to safety rules when using off-road vehicles, especially around railway tracks.

"CN Police prioritize off-road vehicle safety by urging operators to never use railway tracks as trails. Riding on or along railway tracks or trespassing on train bridges or tunnels is illegal and dangerous," says Shawn Will, CN Chief of Police and Chief Security Officer.

With many farms located near railway tracks, and nearly 45,000 kilometres of active railway and approximately 40,000 railway crossings across the country, there's a good chance of encountering trains while using off-road vehicles in rural areas, which is why safety should always stay top of mind.

Railway tracks are not ATV trails

Did you know that because of their large size, it can be difficult to judge how fast a train is moving or how far away it is? It takes a freight train travelling up to 100 km/h, or a passenger train travelling at 160 km/h, about two kilometres to come to a complete stop. That's the equivalent length of 18 football fields.

Sadly, more than 100 Canadians are seriously injured or killed every year as a result of railway crossing or trespassing incidents. And nearly all of these tragedies are preventable.

That's why using designated trails and staying off railway tracks is crucial. Railway tracks are private property, so not only is it dangerous to drive on tracks, but it's also illegal. In fact, you could be fined up to $50,000 for trespassing on railway property.

Even riding alongside train tracks is hazardous since trains are wider than railway tracks. This is particularly dangerous with train tunnels or bridges where there is little or no room to keep safe if a train comes along.

Safe crossings

When riding along ATV trails, always look for signs indicating a railway crossing is up ahead and be prepared to stop. It's important to keep in mind that off-road vehicles are not exempt from following railway signs and signals.

"Off-road vehicles can handle tough terrain—but they are no match for a train. Slow down, stay alert, and make sure tracks are clear before crossing at a 90-degree angle. A few seconds of caution can save a life," Chief Will says.

When approaching a crossing, slow down, look both ways and listen for approaching trains. Since trains can come from either direction at any time, always approach crossings expecting a train. Take extra caution during winter conditions, as snow can reduce visibility, making it difficult to see oncoming trains or railway crossings, and ice may cause vehicles to slide into crossings.

Once you've determined it is safe to cross, do so at a 90-degree angle. If you're towing anything, check that there is enough room on the other side of the tracks to fully clear the crossing by at least five metres without stopping.

What to do if stuck or stalled on tracks

Off-road vehicles can run into problems and break down just like any other farm machinery. But if this happens on railway tracks, it's crucial to act quickly. Immediately get off the ATV and move at least 30 metres away from the tracks to avoid being hit by any debris if a train hits your vehicle.

Once you're safely away from the tracks, contact the railway company to let them know a vehicle is on the tracks. Railway companies post their emergency numbers on a blue sign under the crossbuck (the traffic sign used to indicate a railway crossing) or near the crossing. The number may also be posted on a nearby signal bungalow. If you can't find the railway emergency number, call 911.

Remember that younger riders learn by example and copy what they see, so always follow rail safety rules to set a good example and keep everyone safe.

"Rail safety isn't just about big moments," says Chief Will. "It's about the small, safe choices we make every day. Each time you respect the signs and signals around tracks and railway property, you're helping to keep your community strong and safe."

About Canadian Agricultural Safety Week

Every year, the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association raises awareness about the importance of farm safety with the Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) campaign, which occurs during the third week of March. In 2026, CASW takes place March 15-21 and is sponsored by Syngenta Canada, CN, Canadian Canola Growers Association, and Parrish & Heimbecker. More information is available at agsafetyweek.ca.

About the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

The Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health and safety of farmers, their families and agricultural workers. CASA is funded in part by the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. For more information, visit www.casa-acsa.ca.