

Fatal crash raises farm equipment questions

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A crash last week that killed a teenager who drove into a manure spreader that was stopped on a dark, fog-shrouded road in the Town of Belgium last week has raised questions about safety lights required on farm vehicles.

Steven R. Casarez, 19, of Adell, was on his way to help a friend at 11 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 28, according to his father Steven Sr. He crashed his 1995 Chevrolet pickup truck into the back of a manure spreader attached to a farm tractor in the westbound land of Jay Road one-tenth of a mile west of Kay-K Road.

■ *Manure spreader that teen hit on dark, foggy road did not have lights, but they may not be required, authorities say*

Casarez, who graduated from Random Lake High School last year, was trapped in the truck and died at the scene. A passenger in the pickup, James N. Myers, 17, of Cascade, was taken to Columbia St. Mary's Hospital in Mequon, where he was recovering Tuesday.

Neither teen was wearing a seatbelt, according to the sheriff's department, but the driver's airbag deployed.

The tractor, owned by Lakeside Foods in Belgium and driven by Daniel Golownia,

33, of Belgium, had stopped on the road before turning into a field on the south side to spread a load of potato mash from the canning factory.

Golownia was not injured.

Capt. David Guss of the Ozaukee County Sheriff's Department said there were no lights on the spreader although the lights on the tractor were reportedly on at the time of the crash.

"I was told the fog was dense at that time," he said. "He (Casarez) apparently



Steven R. Casarez

didn't see the manure spreader or was unable to judge the distance."

Some farm equipment, such as manure spreaders, are not required to have brake lights or turn signals as long as the vehicle towing them have such lights that are visible, Guss said. The sheriff's department is now investigating whether that exemption applies to vehicles operated by businesses such as Lakeside Foods.

"We're checking to determine if there is

See Crash on page 2B

Crash: Fatal accident raises questions about lights

FROM PAGE 1B

a difference because it was going from the cannery to the field instead of from field to field," Guss said. "It (the manure spreader) was driven six to seven miles on roads."

In a county where farm equipment and passenger vehicles commonly share rural roads, the crash has raised questions about safety equipment in part because it appears both the driver of the tractor and pickup truck tried to avoid the tragedy.

According to Jeromy Nickelsen, general manager of Lakeside Foods in Belgium, Golownia saw Casarez's truck approaching and stopped his tractor to let him pass as he was trained to do.

"He could tell the vehicle was coming quickly enough that he didn't want to make a left-hand turn until the vehicle went past him," Nickelsen said.

"A lot of times farm accidents happen when equipment crosses the other lane. He was continually looking in the mirror and noticed that the vehicle wasn't turning (into the other lane) and he was concerned that it would run into the back of him."

Skid marks indicate that Casarez tried to avoid hitting the spreader. The department is in the process of reconstructing the accident to determine how fast Casarez was traveling, Guss said.

Casarez's father arrived at the scene

shortly after the ambulance and rescue squad

He said the reflective slow-vehicle sign required on the back of the spreader was mostly covered with debris, and there was a lot of mud on the road.

"The tractor was lighted as we understand it. I wonder if it was lighted enough for the conditions," Mr. Casarez said.

"I'm not trying to put anything on anybody. I'm just trying to fill in the blanks. We're all waiting for the police report to find out exactly what happened."

Nickelsen said the tractor's rear lights are twice as high as the spreader and should have been visible. He estimated the spreader is 15 feet long.

Galownia, who called 911 to report the accident, told authorities he turned off the tractor's rear lights after the impact to use back illumination lights to try to help the victims, Guss said.

"There was nothing he could do for Casarez, who was trapped in the truck, but he talked to the other young man," Guss said.

Fredonia Fire and Rescue, Northern Ozaukee Ambulance and Random Lake Rescue were called to the scene.

Nickelsen said it's common during the potato canning season to spread by-products on fields at all hours of the day.

"It's a 24-hour operation most days," Nickelsen said.

The company will review the accident to see what if any changes should be made, he said.

"We need to see what the investigation shows and get a better understanding of what the cause was," Nickelsen said.

Casarez had left his home on Kay-K Road and had just turned onto Jay Road when the accident occurred, Guss said.

His father said it isn't unusual for his son to receive calls from his friends when they needed help.

"Everybody looked to him for security. He was the rescuer. His telephone number was like 911," he said. "He didn't get to rescue them this time."

"He's so kind-hearted. They called him Shrek, the gentle giant. He filled the part really good."

The sheriff's department has told him they are waiting for toxicology results, but Mr. Casarez said he knows what the tests will show.

"My son and his friends were all really good boys, and there was no alcohol involved as far as I know," he said. "They were watching TV when they got the call to help a friend."

Mr. Casarez said more than 300 friends filled the funeral home for his son's service Monday.

"There is nothing more lifting than to have so many people who care," he said.

Port veterans to be honored Wednesday

Three area veterans will be installed on the Port Washington High School Wall of Honor during a Veterans Day ceremony at the school Wednesday, Nov. 11.

The veterans are Harold Johnson, who served in the Army during World War II; Ken Matthews, a Navy veteran who served during the Vietnam War; and Bruce Staton, who served in the Army during the Gulf War.

The 10:30 a.m. ceremony will include performances by the high school band and chorus, a welcome by the student body president, a moment of silence at 11 a.m., a salute by a firing squad, the playing of Taps and the presentation and retiring of the colors.

Following the ceremony, an open house will be held at the Van Ellis-Schanen American Legion clubhouse on Lake Street in Port Washington.