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Snowplows in Amish Country: A Guide for Buggy Drivers, Pedestrians, and Snowplow Operators

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Inclement weather and fewer daylight hours can make winter roadway travel challenging and dangerous. Negotiating hills and turns under snowy and icy conditions presents demands on both drivers of horse-drawn vehicles and on motorists. However, winter roads also present another danger to pedestrians and operators of horse-drawn vehicles—the presence of snowplows. While there are few rules governing the specific interaction between snowplows and horse-drawn vehicles, there are several best management practices to ensure a safe encounter. For the safety of everyone sharing the roads, it is important to follow basic safety recommendations.

Safety Recommendations for Horse-Drawn Vehicle Drivers

Increase visibility. Effectively lighting and marking your horse-drawn vehicles allows motorists to see it quickly in daylight, low light, and precipitation. Bad weather conditions can increase motor vehicle stopping distance by as much as ten times as compared to dry road conditions, so it is very important to mark buggies clearly and allow motorists

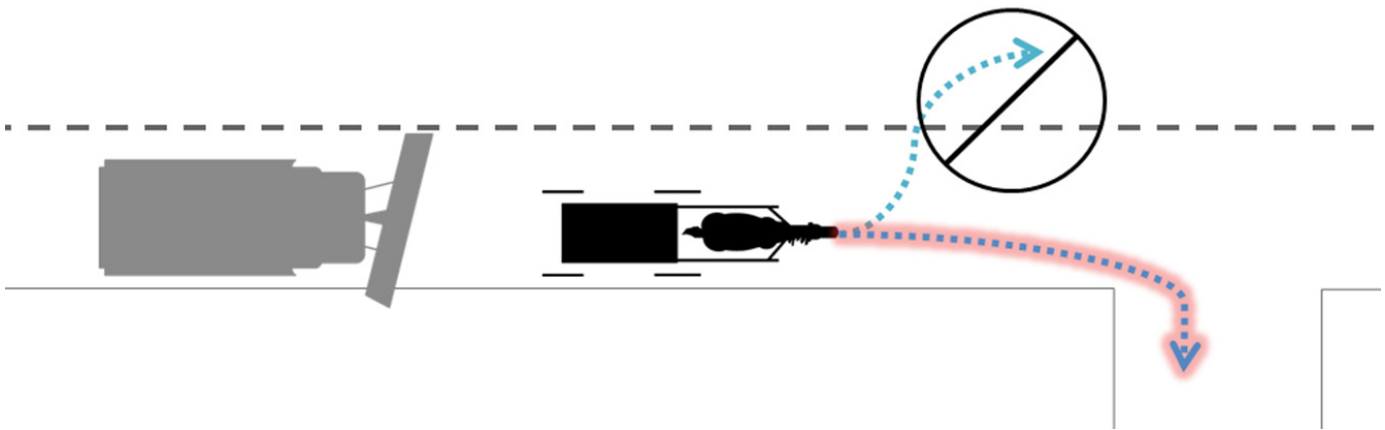
to recognize them from at least one thousand feet away. Prominently display the Slow Moving Vehicle (SMV) emblem, properly-applied retroreflective tape, and the appropriate headlights and flashers on your horse-drawn vehicle in order to alert motorists that a buggy is ahead (see *Lighting and Marking Recommendations for Buggies and Wagons*, AEX 596.4-09). While marking the rear of the horse-drawn vehicle is important, it is equally important to mark the sides and shaft with retroreflective tape to prevent side collisions. Retroreflective leg bands for horses are highly recommended in order to help motorists visualize the horse in addition to the buggy. When motorized drivers recognize horse-drawn vehicles from a distance, they can slow down sooner and pass safely.

Use an experienced horse. While your horse may be familiar encountering regular road traffic during other times of the year, the loud sounds and flashing lights of a snowplow may frighten a relatively inexperienced animal. Therefore, use an experienced horse during winter travels. Remember that all animals can be unpredictable, and even an experienced horse can react unexpectedly to sudden sounds and movement.

Know how to travel. Just as it is important to know your horse, it is also important to know how to drive in snowy conditions. An experienced driver is more likely to respond quickly and safely to a frightened horse. Inexperienced drivers may not have the good judgment to know how to react, and they may lack the physical strength to keep the horse under control. Having a snowplow approach a buggy from ahead or behind can be a worrisome experience if the driver is uncertain about what to do. Regardless of the direc-

tion the snowplow is approaching, always pull over as far to the right as the road allows. It is important to know that snowplows are not permitted to pass an automobile or horse-drawn vehicle if it is traveling in the same direction as the plow. Buggy drivers should not stop in the middle of the lane, and should never cross to the opposite side of the road to avoid the plow. The best option is to pull into a driveway and allow the snowplow to pass before continuing.

The buggy driver should pull over to the right and allow the snowplow to pass instead of pulling into the oncoming lane of traffic.



Pedestrians and Snowplows

In rural areas, pedestrians may also encounter snowplows in their daily travel. Unlike horse-drawn vehicles, pedestrians face the oncoming plow and need to take basic steps for their own safety. Snowplow drivers may find it difficult to stop quickly if a pedestrian suddenly appears in their zone of travel, particularly in hilly terrain where visibility is limited.

Safety Recommendations for Pedestrians

- Look ahead and listen for snowplows.
- If you see a plow coming, find a safe place to stand until it passes. The best practice is to get off the road and enter a driveway. If no driveway is close, stop and wait for the plow to pass you.
- Do not run to the other side of the road without looking both ways. Check for traffic, especially for vehicles that may be traveling behind the snowplow.

- Be visible to traffic and snowplows. Wear reflective vests or armbands even during daylight hours. Carrying or wearing a flashlight may help you see, but it does not always alert drivers of your presence. To motorists, the light is only noticeable erratically and cannot be seen from a far distance.

Safety Recommendations for Snowplow Operators

- If possible, it is highly recommended that snowplow activity be restricted on certain roads during times of high-pedestrian travel (e.g., during school hours).
- Plow operators should slow down when approaching and passing pedestrians to prevent the plow from spraying the pedestrians with snow and gravel.

Safety Recommendations for Snowplow Operators

Decrease speed. While it is unlikely that you are operating the snowplow at a high speed, it is important to stay alert to the surroundings and to slow down when encountering horse-drawn vehicles. Reduce speed upon sighting a buggy, whether you are approaching it from ahead or behind. Slowing down the plow will help to prevent the horse from bolting and will give the buggy driver more time to pull over safely. Animals can be unpredictable; even well-trained horses can be frightened by the snowplow's lights, blade, dump bed, or spreader. If you notice that a horse is having trouble adjusting to the presence of your approaching plow, keep moving forward along the intended path at an extremely slow speed. Horses remain calmer when traffic continues to move slowly and does not stop completely. However, in the event that an extremely nervous horse bolts into the line of traffic, you will need to stop and wait until the buggy driver regains control.

Don't follow too closely. As with any other vehicle, it is important not to follow horse-drawn vehicles too closely. Buggies are more agile than motor vehicles and can stop much more quickly than a snowplow on an icy road. For this reason it is important to leave

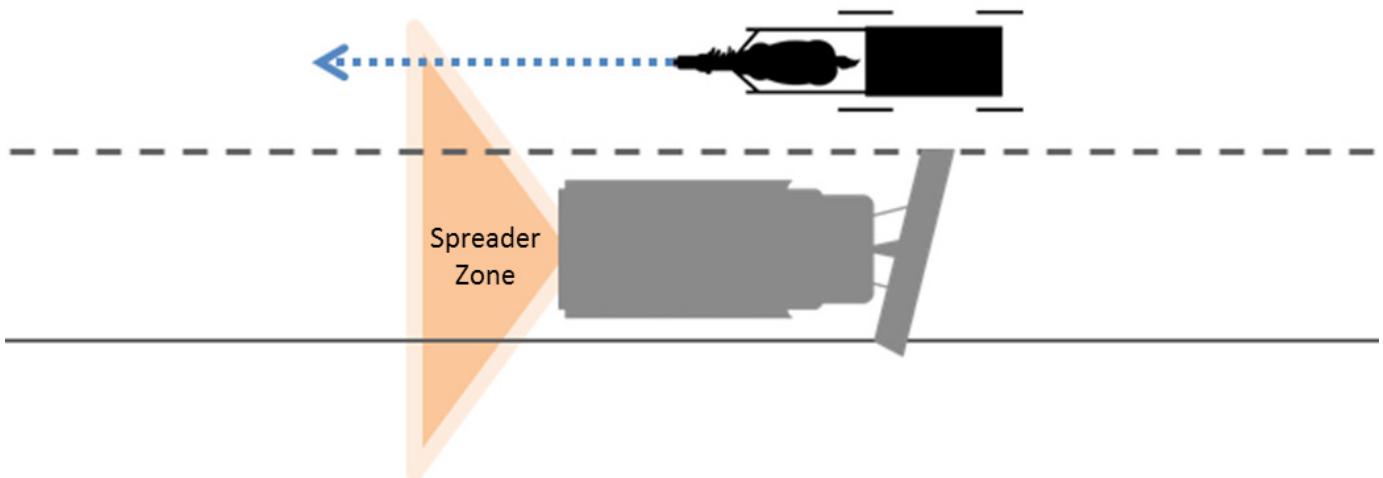
ample distance between your plow and the buggy to help prevent a collision in the event that the buggy stops abruptly. While traveling up or down hills, it may be necessary to come to a complete stop until the buggy is a safe distance away.

Turn off flashing lights. It is not usually recommended to completely turn off flashing lights; however, it may be necessary when encountering a frightened horse. Over time, more experienced horses may become desensitized to flashing vehicle and traffic lights. However, the reflection of lights beaming off wet roads, snow, fog, or cloud cover can sometimes confuse and startle an animal.

Consider the blade. For everyone's safety, it is important not to raise the snowplow blade and leave a patch of unplowed snow on the road. If the blade is emitting sparks or loose gravel, lightly feather it to reduce noise and vibrations, which can scare a horse.

Lower the dump bed and stop the spreaders. Some horses become frightened if the dump bed is in a raised position or if the rear spreaders are in operation. Horses may startle when the snowplow passes in either direction. If you notice a horse reacting to either of these situations, turn off the spreader and slowly lower the bed.

Horses may enter the spreader zone as they pass a snowplow. If the snowplow operator does not shut off the spreader, flying gravel or salt can strike the horse and cause it to charge, rear, or run off the road.



Summary

Snowplowing is an important public safety service. It is essential for both motorized and non-motorized drivers to know how to interact with a snowplow. Likewise, snowplow operators must look out for horse-drawn vehicles and understand that horses will react differently than conventional vehicles due to the sights and sounds of the plow. Follow the recommendations outlined in this fact sheet to help everyone arrive at his or her destination safely.

References

Yarosh, A. J., Hitchcock, R. E., Bean, T. L., Lawrence, T. J., and James, R. E. 1992. *Buggy driving safety, student workbook, Bulletin 830*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Extension.

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