

Ag Safety: The Right Way to Extract Stuck Vehicles

One of the perennial hassles in the agricultural sector is getting trucks or tractors stuck in the mud, dirt or snow.

Unfortunately, during these times workers stand a greater chance of getting injured, or worse. Serious, disabling injuries and deaths have occurred when a towing device failed. Tractor and truck cabs may not stop the force of the towing device and the recoiling equipment may strike the operator.

But you can avoid the chances of that happening by training your workers in safe towing practices when dislodging a stuck vehicle.

Safety precautions and techniques will vary depending, among other things, on:

- Soil conditions
- How deep a vehicle is stuck
- How much the stuck vehicle weighs
- How much the towing vehicle weighs

First step: Breathe easy

Too often the workers and supervisors are in too much of a hurry to extract the vehicle. When people are rushing, they tend to make mistakes, and they can be costly in terms of property damage and injuries.

Second step: Know the weights

Determine how much weight you need to move and how heavy the towing vehicle needs to be. You can get the deadweight in your vehicle owner's manual. But you need to calculate the total gross weight of what is stuck, including the vehicle, possible trailer, and the payload that you will need to pull.

The size of the towing truck or tractor will depend on the weight of what's stuck and how deep it is buried.

A good rule of thumb is that the towing vehicle needs to be of equal weight to the stuck vehicle. If the stuck truck can assist, a towing vehicle that weighs as much as the stuck one is usually sufficient to get the job done.

If the vehicle is only slightly stuck, then the weight of the pulling equipment should be at least equal to the loaded weight of the stuck vehicle. You'll need heavier trucks or tractors to extract vehicles that are stuck deeper.

For better traction in the stuck zone, remove or dig out dirt around the sidewalls and in front of the tires.

Ideally, you want to position the towing vehicle on higher ground.

Third step: Clear the gawkers

Extractions and stuck vehicles always attract onlookers. Clear the area of non-essential personnel for everyone's safety.

Fourth step: Use a proper device

Often people grab the nearest rope, nylon strap, cable or chain they can find, but they need to remember that whatever they use will be put under a significant pulling force or tension.

If this device or a part of the device “such as a hook” breaks, the towing device suddenly becomes a dangerous projectile.

A long towing chain designed to support the towed load is recommended over nylon ropes or cables. Chains will break at their weakest point, so check welds and hooks prior to use.

Use equipment that is rated for the job.

Fifth step: Precautions

You should always do the following (whether the equipment is carrying hazardous materials or not):

- Assess how badly the equipment is stuck and figure out if further damage may result if you continue. If so, call a professional.
- Determine whether the axles are dragging.
- Determine if the vehicle bellied out or is resting on the frame or rear-end housing.
- How much does any cargo weigh? Can it shift if the equipment is pulled?
- Assess the condition of the ground under the pulling vehicle: Is it sand, clay or snow, and is it hard or soft?
- Take precautions to protect all drivers and bystanders from injury and flying debris.
- Determine whether the equipment is leaning to one side.
- Know where power lines are located, to avoid contact with them.

Sixth step: Pre-towing checks/coordination

Initiate the towing process with caution and double-check all attachments to see that they are secure before starting

If using more than one pulling vehicle, the drivers must coordinate with each other. The drivers and everyone else involved should know the plan for extraction

Each operator should understand the situations that will stop the towing process. If using hand signals to communicate between operators, ensure everyone knows their meaning.

When the towing process begins, apply power smoothly without jerking.

Stop and re-evaluate:

- At the slightest sign of danger
- If the tractor front end lifts off the ground
- If there is a slip in attachment of the towing device.

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