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Combine header trailers – an overview of the issue

Under Construction and Use Regulations (C&U), 1986, a header trailer is classed as an agricultural trailed appliance conveyor.

This is defined as an agricultural trailer which:

- has an unladen weight which does not exceed 510 kg;
- is clearly and indelibly marked with its unladen weight;
- has a pneumatic tyre fitted to each one of its wheels;
- is designed and constructed for the purpose of conveying one agricultural trailed appliance or one agricultural, horticultural or forestry implement.

Being classed in this way means that such a trailer is exempt from the requirement for brakes.

However, header trailers such as the one to the right now have an unladen weight exceeding 510kg.

The picture inset shows the plates belonging to this particular header. They are a little unclear but actually display its unladen weight at 840kg.



Under C&U it therefore can't be classed as a trailed appliance conveyor as described on the plate and so would come under a general agricultural trailer which would need brakes appropriate for its maximum gross weight.

In this case, as the plated weight is over 3.5 tonnes, this trailer would need a brake which is able to be operated from the cab of the towing vehicle along with a parking brake.

Another example is the plate to the right, which is on the trailer below. Again it's described as a trailed appliance conveyor, but has a stated unladen weight of 2000kg, almost four times the permitted weight, which would take it well out of the definition of a trailed appliance conveyor.



Due to the heavier weight this trailer has been fitted with brakes in the form of an overrun braking system, as pictured to the right.

However, under the current Regs, this type of system is only appropriate for trailers under 3500kg gross weight, whereas this trailer tops out at 6000kg and so again would need an brake operated from the cab of the towing vehicle with a parking brake.



The other potential issue with this type trailer comes from the fact that it has four wheels.

Under the Road Vehicles (Authorisation of Special Types) (General) Order, 2003 (the STGO), agricultural vehicles such as combines are legally restricted to towing:

- (a) a two wheeled trailer used solely for the carriage of equipment for use on the towing vehicle;
- (b) an agricultural trailed appliance; or
- (c) an unladen trailer specially designed for use with the towing vehicle when it is harvesting.

This trailer doesn't fit into any of these categories and so presumably is not legal to be towed as a combination depicted to the right.



If the trailer above is towed behind a tractor then aside from not being braked adequately, there is a length restriction under C&U of 12 metres not including the drawbar. Under the same Regulation, if the number of wheels of the trailer drops below four, then the length restriction for an agricultural trailer drops to 7 metres.

Farmers have a basic expectation that if they purchase a piece of equipment which is marketed as suitable for road travel, that it will be legal to be used on the road as sold— especially if a trailer comes with such items as number plates on. I'm sure if farmers start being prosecuted for offences under C&U that a significant number would want to bring the matter back to the door of the manufacturer.

We have brought this up with the AEA who have told us that they have been aware of this problem for some time but have not managed to get the law changed or come to an understanding with the enforcement authorities, who I suspect have largely been unaware of the problem until now. Claas have recently issued press notices stating the legality of using their header trailers.

With the push for larger, more efficient vehicles in the field, the transportation issues are only going to get worse until the regulations are changed and this disparity between equipment and the law is closed.

Due to the perceived lack of progress from machinery manufacturers, we have started to discuss the issue with the Department for Transport to see if we can reach an understanding before harvest.

The possibility of adjusting C&U and the STGO is small, but we feel that legislation should not restrict technical progress, especially when our European colleagues are able to use this type of equipment.