Science Societies

Can smartphone AI make farm equipment inspection more accessible?

A practical perspective on using computer vision for preliminary equipment screening

By Artur Bilianivskyi, ASA member

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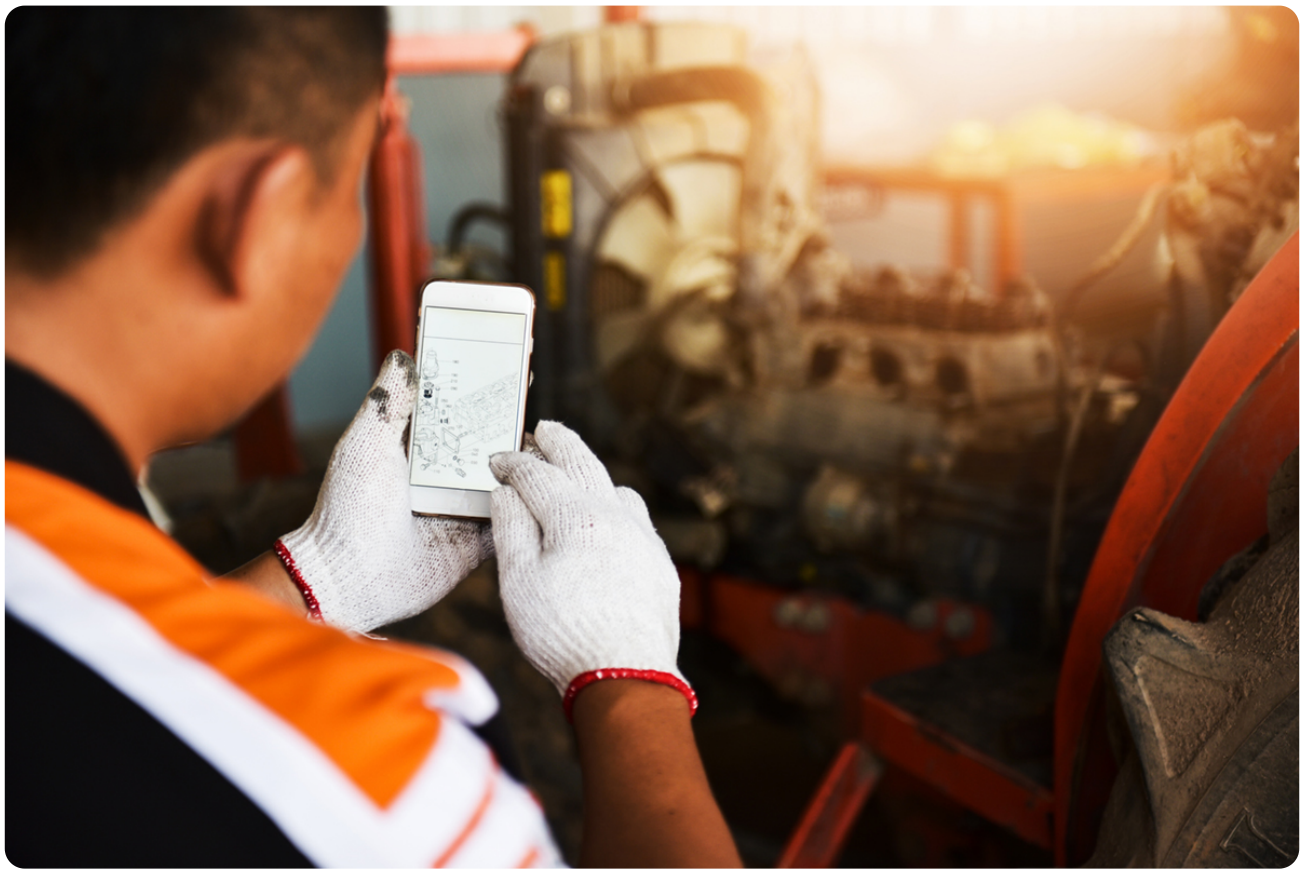

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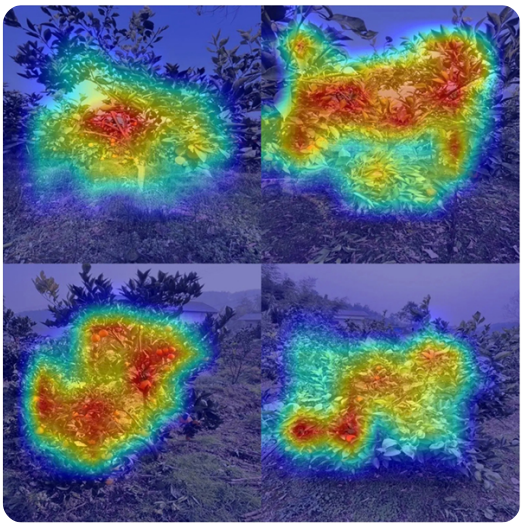
Could a smartphone help farmers spot equipment problems before they become bigger repairs? This article explores a proposed AI-assisted tractor inspection system and examines both its potential benefits and the challenges of false alarms, missed defects, and real-world field conditions.

During planting or harvest, an equipment problem can interrupt work when timing matters most. Routine walk-arounds provide an opportunity to notice damaged, leaking, worn, or otherwise unusual components before operation continues. Yet visible warning signs are not always obvious, and what an operator sees can change with lighting, dust, viewing angle, and the condition of the machine.



Qu and Zhang (2026) examined a lightweight deep-learning method for estimating per-tree citrus fruit counts

from single-view images. Photo courtesy of Hongchun Qu.

Research has already explored agricultural uses of smartphone imagery. Qu and Zhang (2026) examined a lightweight deep-learning method for estimating per-tree citrus fruit counts from single-view images. *CSA News* describes the approach as using a single smartphone photograph in real orchards. The study was not about machinery inspection, and its results cannot be transferred automatically to tractors or implements. It offers a narrower starting point: smartphone images can provide data for a defined agricultural computer-vision task.

That raises a practical question: Could a smartphone become an additional first-line tool for identifying visible equipment problems?

The realistic goal is not to turn a phone into a mechanic. It is to explore whether guided image capture and AI-based screening could help an operator answer a simpler question: **Is there something visible here that deserves a closer look?**

From an image to an inspection

At its simplest, smartphone-based inspection would begin with a photograph. A computer-vision model would analyze patterns in that image using what it learned during training. Depending on its design, the system might classify an image, locate a suspicious area, or outline part of a component for review.

Research on industrial defect detection provides a basis for investigating this approach. Nahar et al. (2026) reviewed AI-based methods for detecting defects in industrial products. That field offers relevant techniques, but it does not establish that those techniques will work reliably on agricultural equipment photographed in the field.

Figure from Nahar et al. (2026) showing defect examples: (a) fray on fabric (b) crease on steel (c) color imperfection on fabric, (d) silk screen printing and (e) crack on metal surface. CC BY 4.0.

A farm-equipment application would need its own development and validation. A practical interface might guide the operator through selected inspection points and request photographs from defined angles. The model could then screen the images and flag areas for human review.

The important word is *screen*. A photograph offers a view of an external surface at one moment. It does not reveal the complete mechanical condition of a tractor or implement.

What a camera might see—and what it cannot

Some equipment problems have a visible component. With suitable data and validation, future models might be developed to flag patterns associated with surface cracks, corrosion, deformation, abnormal external wear, apparent fluid leakage, tire damage, or a component that appears displaced.

These are potential research targets, not a list of capabilities already proven across farm machinery.

Even a correct visual flag is not a diagnosis. A photograph may show an area that resembles a leak, but it may not reveal the source, cause, severity, or whether

continued operation is safe. Internal mechanical conditions and some hydraulic or electrical problems may not be visible in an ordinary photograph.

Seeing a possible problem is not the same as diagnosing it. That boundary should shape both system design and the language shown to users.

A different question from scheduled or predictive maintenance

Scheduled preventive maintenance is organized around service intervals, operating hours, manufacturer recommendations, and planned inspection or replacement. Smartphone visual screening would not remove those requirements. It could potentially add another observation between service events or make a routine walk-around more structured.

Condition monitoring and predictive maintenance address a broader set of questions. Depending on the application, monitoring systems may use vibration, temperature, pressure, acoustic, electrical, or operational data to assess equipment condition (Ji et al., 2026). Predictive approaches use relevant condition and historical information to help anticipate deterioration or maintenance needs.

An ordinary smartphone photograph does not directly measure internal vibration, hydraulic pressure, lubricant condition, or other signals that may matter to a diagnosis.

The approaches therefore answer different questions:

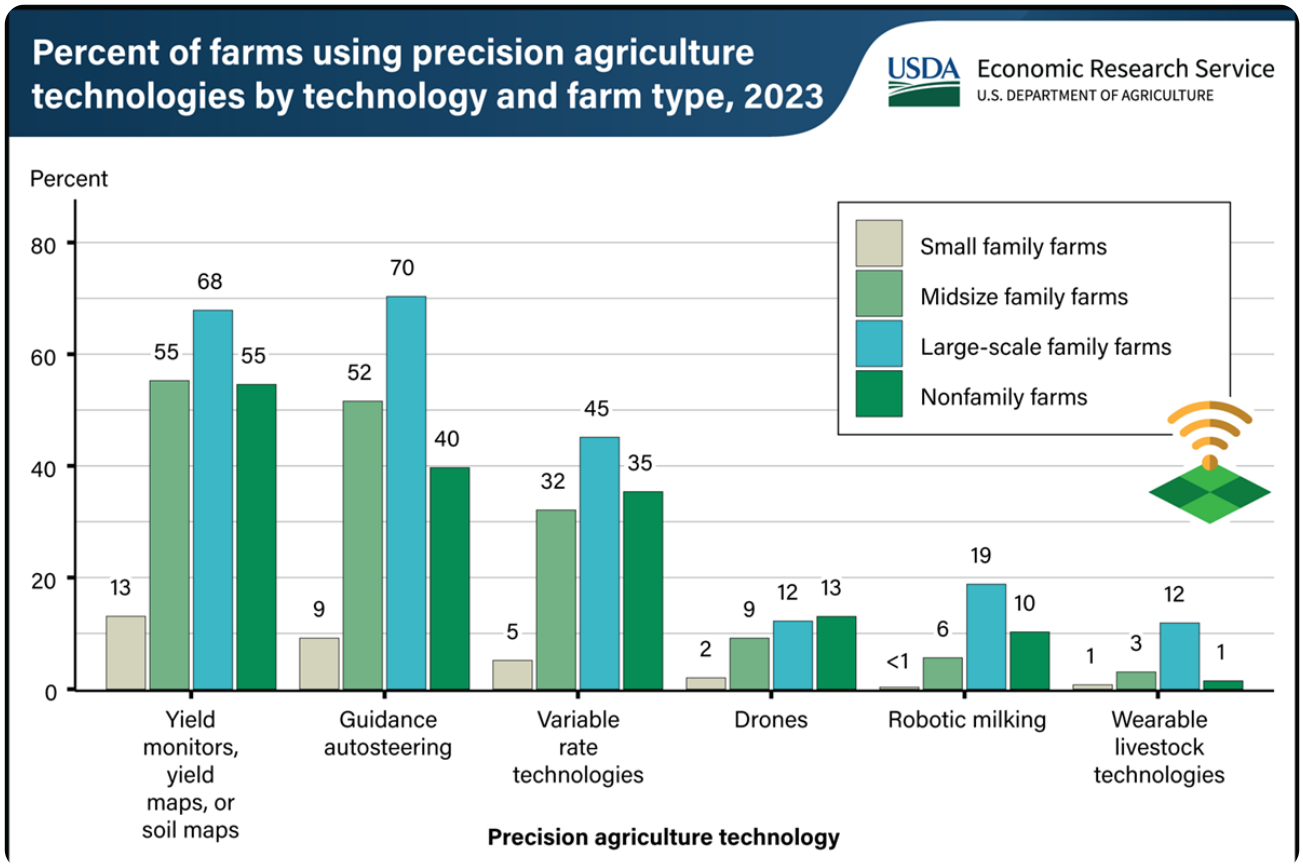
- **Scheduled maintenance:** What should be serviced according to the maintenance plan?
- **Predictive maintenance:** What do condition data suggest about equipment deterioration or future maintenance needs?

- **Smartphone visual screening:** Is there something visible here that deserves closer inspection?

Keeping those questions separate prevents a limited visual tool from being mistaken for a complete diagnostic or predictive-maintenance system.

Why accessibility matters

Digital-agriculture adoption is uneven. USDA Economic Research Service data for 2023 show that guidance and autosteering systems were used by 52% of midsize farms and 70% of large-scale crop-producing farms (McFadden & Lim, 2024). Small family farms had the lowest adoption rates across the technology categories reported.



Source: McFadden & Lim, 2024.

An *Agronomy Journal* study by Cano et al. (2026) surveyed 247 farmers about digital agriculture. The USDA-ARS summary of the study identifies high costs relative to benefits and small farm size as common adoption barriers.

These findings concern digital agriculture broadly. They do not measure demand for smartphone machinery inspection or demonstrate its economic value. They do, however, make accessibility a relevant question when designing another agricultural technology.

A smartphone does not erase the costs of developing and operating a reliable application. Software, training data, testing, user support, and possibly connectivity or subscriptions would still have to be considered. But for an operator who already owns a suitable phone, its camera and interface could reduce the need for dedicated image-capture equipment.

That is an opportunity to investigate, rather than evidence that the resulting service would necessarily be inexpensive.

The distinction between the existing evidence and the proposed application remains essential. Researchers have used smartphone imagery for agricultural computer-vision tasks such as citrus counting. The proposed machinery-inspection application would require its own evidence of reliability, usability, and value.

A screening tool in the existing routine

If validated, the tool could fit within a familiar walk-around. An application might prompt an operator to photograph specified components from specified positions, request a replacement for a blurred or poorly framed image, and flag a region that merits another look.

Repeated, standardized images might also help document visible changes over time. Whether those comparisons improve maintenance decisions would need to be tested.

The output should not declare that a machine is safe or predict a failure date from a single image. A more appropriate message would identify the area of concern and explain the next inspection step.

For example, a future interface might indicate: *This area appears unusual. Inspect it more closely.*

That is an illustrative design message, not a claim about an existing application. The operator would verify the observation and involve a mechanic or qualified technician when diagnosis or repair is required.

This narrower role could complement sensor-based monitoring. Sensors and photographs provide different kinds of information. Where both are available, visual observations might add context to condition data. Where dedicated monitoring is unavailable, a validated visual tool might address one limited part of inspection while scheduled servicing and professional diagnosis remain essential.

Where AI can get it wrong

Taking a photograph is simple. Building a dependable decision-support system from photographs is more demanding. Performance depends on what the camera sees, how the image is captured, and whether the new situation falls within the conditions for which the model has been evaluated.

Lighting and camera angle

Direct sun, deep shade, reflections, and shadows change the appearance of a surface. Distance, focus, resolution, and viewing angle affect how much detail the image

contains.

For machinery inspection, the practical concern is straightforward: A feature may be clear from one position and obscured from another. A model cannot reliably assess a defect that the photograph does not adequately show.

A useful application would therefore likely need a capture procedure that explains which component to photograph, how to frame it, and when to take another image. These procedures would need testing alongside the model itself.

Dirt and normal field wear

Dust, mud, grease, moisture, crop residue, scratches, and ordinary wear alter a component's appearance. Dirt may conceal a defect or create a pattern that resembles one.

Dust, mud, grease, moisture, crop residue, scratches, and ordinary wear alter a component's appearance. Dirt may conceal a defect or create a pattern that resembles one. Photo courtesy of Shutterstock/Serg Grbanoff.

A development program should therefore include realistic field images and distinguish harmless surface variation from abnormalities that warrant attention. Strong performance on clean components under controlled lighting would not establish reliability on working farm equipment.

Different machinery models

Components vary across manufacturers, models, ages, repairs, and configurations. A model trained mainly on one design cannot be assumed to work equally well on another.

The agricultural-machinery diagnostic literature examines this broader challenge of transferring models across machines and operating conditions (Zhang et al., 2026). For a smartphone application, validation would also need to account for differences in cameras, image processing, surface appearance, and capture practices.

Limited training datasets

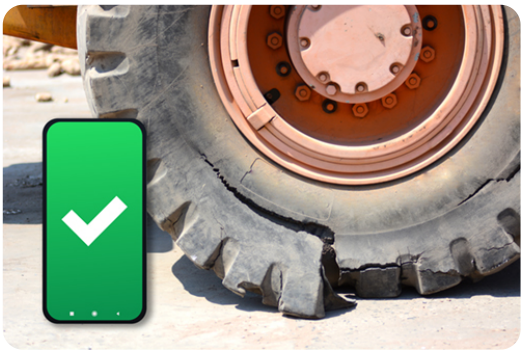
Useful datasets would need verified examples of normal condition, harmless wear, meaningful abnormalities, and relevant defects. Experienced technicians would need to help define the labels and determine what counts as a problem requiring action.

An image alone may not establish whether a mark is cosmetic or mechanically important. Where that distinction requires physical inspection or another diagnostic method, the dataset should reflect that additional evidence.

Rare defects would present a particular challenge. A model should not be described as reliable for a defect category simply because it has performed well on a few examples.

False positives and false negatives

A false positive occurs when the system flags a problem that is not present. Repeated false alarms could waste time and make operators less willing to use the tool.



A false negative occurs when a real problem is present, but the system misses it. Photo courtesy of

Shutterstock/pangcom and Adobe Stock/YoGinta.

A false negative occurs when a real problem is present, but the system misses it. The consequences could be serious if an operator interprets the absence of an alert as permission to continue operating.

For that reason, **“no issue detected” must not be treated as proof that equipment is safe**.

Evaluation should report both kinds of error and explain which defects, components, and conditions were tested. A single overall accuracy score would not answer those questions.

Generalization and uncertainty

Generalization means performing usefully beyond the particular examples used during development. For this concept, the critical question is what happens when the application encounters a different machine, phone camera, environment, or defect.

A responsible design should provide a way to decline an assessment when an image is unsuitable or the case falls outside the validated scope. However, recognizing those situations is itself a technical challenge; a model’s confidence score should not automatically be assumed to identify every unfamiliar case.

The ability to request another image or refer the case to a person would need to be tested. Sometimes the appropriate result would simply be: *Unable to assess this image.*

From field experience to a mobile inspection concept

Drawing on my professional experience in agriculture, I approach this question as a practical inspection problem: Could a smartphone help an operator carry out a more structured first-level visual check?

My Mobile AI Tractor Inspection System concept explores that possibility. I present it here as a proposed workflow for development and validation without claiming demonstrated diagnostic performance.

The workflow would have five steps:

Capture → Screen → Flag → Verify → Act

An operator would capture guided images of selected tractor components. A model would screen those images for defined visual patterns. The interface would highlight a possible abnormality for review. The operator would verify the observation, involving a qualified technician when diagnosis or repair is needed. Maintenance decisions would remain with the responsible people.

The concept would not declare a tractor safe, identify every mechanical cause from a photograph, or replace scheduled service. Its possible contribution is to structure a preliminary inspection and draw attention to a component that may deserve further examination.

An unclear image, unfamiliar component, or case outside the validated range should lead to another photograph or human review. These responses would be design requirements to evaluate, not capabilities to assume.

The practical ambition is to help an operator notice and communicate a concern more consistently. Whether AI improves that process remains a question for field testing.

What would have to be proven

Moving from concept to field use would require more than a successful demonstration on selected photographs. I would propose evaluating the following areas.

Representative data. Development images should cover the machinery and components within the intended scope, including relevant manufacturers, models, ages, normal wear, defects, phones, and field conditions. The initial scope may need to be narrow enough to validate credibly.

Standardized capture. Researchers and technicians would need to define what to photograph, at what distance and angles, and how to handle poor lighting, obscured components, or inadequate image quality.

Researchers and technicians would need to define what to photograph, at what distance and angles, and how to handle poor lighting, obscured components, or inadequate image quality. AI-generated image courtesy of Microsoft Copilot.

Independent field validation. Testing should include machines and conditions not used during development. Splitting near-identical photographs of the same component between training and testing would not establish performance on unfamiliar equipment.

Expert comparison. AI flags should be compared with qualified assessments, supported by physical inspection or other diagnostic evidence where necessary. Disagreements should be examined rather than resolved automatically in favor of either the model or the initial image label.

Error and uncertainty analysis. Evaluation should report false alarms, missed defects, unassessable images, and performance outside familiar conditions. Any confidence-based escalation or abstention mechanism would also need validation.

Human factors. Operators should be able to understand the result and the appropriate next step. Testing should examine whether the application creates false confidence, unnecessary interruptions, or confusion about responsibility.

Practical value. Finally, the application should be compared with an appropriate existing inspection routine. Does it help people notice relevant abnormalities? Does it improve documentation or communication? How much time and expense does it add?

Claims about fewer breakdowns, lower maintenance costs, or earlier detection would require evidence that directly measures those outcomes. Detecting a visible feature in an image would not, by itself, establish any of those benefits.

The next step may be smaller than full automation

Smartphone AI could be worth investigating as an additional visual-screening tool within existing equipment-care routines. Its usefulness would depend on a clearly defined task, representative data, independent testing, and outputs that people can interpret correctly.

For small and midsize farms, accessibility would have to mean more than using an ordinary phone. The complete service would need to be affordable, usable, compatible with the equipment being inspected, and worth the time required.

The near-term opportunity may be a guided visual check that draws attention to a possible abnormality and helps communicate it to someone qualified to assess it.

The central question is therefore not whether a phone can tell a farmer exactly what is wrong with a machine. It is whether a carefully validated tool can help an operator answer: **What should I take a closer look at?**

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