

Towing the Line

A preventive maintenance plan is the cornerstone of Wayne Poe's streamlined program at First Colony.



Steve Poe mows around a man-made lake with a Deere F910.

In the last five years Wayne Poe has hired more than 60 grounds maintenance workers and purchased dozens of mowers and a fleet of tractors. He's trying to keep up with the expanding grounds maintenance duties of a rapidly growing planned community called First Colony in Sugar Land, about 10 miles west of Houston, TX.

Poe moved to Sugar Land in 1967 to be a farm manager for a corporation that owned about 4,200 acres of farm and pastureland. In 1972 the corporation sold the land to Sugarland Properties Incorporated, a land development organization that intended to create a planned community where Poe had been running cattle.

He stayed on as grounds maintenance manager for the new company and sometimes smiles at the irony of his new position.

"I decided it would be easier to change from farming and ranching and try to make the grass grow where before I tried to kill it all the time," Poe says.

Sleeping giant

For the next 12 years Poe and a crew of four workers handled the grounds maintenance duties while Sugarland Properties acquired nearly 10,000 acres of land and completed a master plan for controlled development of residential, commercial and retail store areas in what would someday become a city of 100,000 people.

"We had one push mower and two 1958 John Deere 730 tractors in those days," Poe reminisces. "Then one day in 1980 our executive vice president said to me, 'You better start buying some equipment because in 12 to 18 months you're going to have about a hundred people out here mowing grass.' At first I laughed. Then I asked, 'Is it really going to move that fast?' And sure enough, within 18 months we had around 80 employees on grounds maintenance. Now I have 65 people in my crew and the commercial division has another 28. We can have as many as 115 people work-

ing out here."

The Sugarland crew mows about 400 acres every week and keeps it clear of trash. The people work five 10-hour days a week, including 10 hours of overtime. They get an hour for lunch and two weeks of paid vacation.

Poe fills in with part-time help during the summer vacation months.

Poe had no trouble finding people. He said people still come in every day looking for work. But he did have some problems finding people who shared his concern for preventive maintenance.

"When I interview a person, I say straight out—if you're going to mistreat the equipment, I'm going to send you right out the door!" he says. "I try to get the best equipment I can for the crew to work with and I expect them to keep it like new."

Lots of grease

As his staff and equipment needs have grown in the last five years, his emphasis on preventive maintenance has continued. "We use a lot of grease", he explains. "We grease the equipment every morning and we grease it again after lunch. I insist on it

because grease is cheaper than parts and a lot easier to put on. And I'm picky about changing oil. For push mowers we change the oil every 50 hours. The larger tractors we run 100 hours between oil changes. We have some machines that get new oil and oil filters every Saturday morning. Now some people may say I'm wasting lots of good oil, but I've got a 1977 Deere tractor out here that you can work just as hard as you want to and it won't use a drop of oil."

Cleanliness is another part of Poe's preventive maintenance program. His crew washes every pickup truck and mowing machine every working day. One reason for daily washing is public image and salesmanship.

Customers and executives are touring the property every day so the equipment has to look well-maintained to help reinforce the image of a well-planned, well-run community development.

But cleanliness also has its maintenance advantages. Poe says, "We scrape and wash every mower deck every night. I tell the crew to keep the machinery clean enough that you can sit on any piece of equipment in the shop and eat a sandwich. I have three-



Wayne Poe monitors hours of equipment use to be sure that crankcase oil is changed every 100 hours on a tractor, every 50 hours on a push mower. Carl Smith checks the oil.

year-old mower decks without a spot of rust."

Poe says he doesn't rely on checklists or paper work to keep track of preventive maintenance work because he monitors it all the time and his crew people know that they must take care of the equipment.

Poe goes a step further by instilling pride in his workers. He uses several techniques to help the crew take pride in their machines and their work. Sugarland Properties provides uniforms and caps for every grounds maintenance employee. Each employee pays \$8 a month for five uniforms and weekly laundering.

Each worker is assigned to an individual machine. And Poe spends an hour every night helping the crew wash, wax and polish the mowing machines. "We want to look first class because we're a first-class outfit," he says.

Poe has had some employee turnover problems, but 75 percent of his staff has been with him for two to three years. After six months of employment, employees receive family major medical insurance and dental plans for \$39 a month and a week of paid vacation.

Equipment

In the last five years Poe has purchased three dozen push mowers and 10 tractors ranging from 14.5 to 80 hp. "I look at the quality of the machine," Poe says. "I want something that will last. I consider the performance of the equipment and its safety features. Price is the last thing I look at. When an equipment dealer shows me a machine that meets my expectations, then I start chewing on the price. But I don't mind paying a little more for something that will hold up."

The Sugarland groundskeepers mow the Bermudagrass to 1 1/4 inches from 50 to 56 times a year, fertilize it twice, and overseed with winter rye.

The operation continues year round.

Poe tries to have enough equipment on hand to keep a full crew going even when a machine breaks down. Two mechanics handle repairs and draw parts from a well-stocked supply.

"We carry a good-size parts inventory for every piece of equipment. If I need one part, I'll buy two and keep one on a shelf. When I reach for that one, I call the dealer to order another one. That helps because you can catch a dealer short."

When buying new equipment, Poe looks for certain safety features. He likes safety devices that keep a machine under control if something happens to the operator.

Because the crew people work in residential areas where street traffic and pedestrians can pass near, it's critical that a tractor have something like a seat safety switch that automatically shuts off the engine should the operator dismount while the mower is engaged.

He also looks for safety devices that protect a passersby from objects thrown by a mower blade. Many of these safety features help protect the crew as well.

Poe provides safety glasses and a safety vest for operators to wear. Employees are forbidden to wear tennis shoes.

"I want to take care of my staff just like I'd want someone to take care of me. I spent time in the oil fields and I've seen where safety is a big factor in whether or not you walked away from a rig under your own power."

Sugarland's grounds maintenance staff is organized into two divisions—one crew that maintains the 36-hole golf course and other sports facilities including tennis courts and swimming pools, and one division that maintains the boulevard strips within the planned community and the corporation property that surrounds the

20 residential areas, and the industrial and commercial parks.

Owners of single-family houses, apartment complexes and condominiums are responsible for their own grounds maintenance. Many of them would like Poe's crew to handle the work but he has to keep growth under control.

Several private mowing contractors help keep the community trim without adding to Poe's staff.

Poe manages the general property maintenance division.

His staff is organized into five groups with a crew leader and six groundskeepers. A 12 to 15 member crew mows the large, open areas. The whole 400 acres is mowed in three days. The rest of the week is used for cleaning up trash.

"I try to keep the respect of my crew people because if you don't have their respect, they're not going to do a good job," Poe said. "I like to stop someone every once in a while and say 'Hey, go get yourself a drink of water.' Then I'll grab his mower and work with it a spell. I won't ask anyone to do something that I wouldn't do or haven't done."

Poe believes that a manager must be firm with his employees, but at the same time respect them as individuals.

Incentive

One way he shows respect and concern for the crew is simply patting a person on the back when he does a good job. Another way is to trust the crew to do whatever it takes to keep First Colony in first-class trim.

Because the Sugarland crew works from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., it's often difficult for the workers to get to the bank on payday or handle other errands during business hours. And some things can't be done on Saturdays.

Poe devised a plan that gives the crew a half day off on paydays if it completes the weekly tasks within four days. The workers appreciate the time off to handle their personal business and therefore don't ask for extra time off during other days of the month, unless there is a family emergency.

Poe's management style has allowed him to keep pace with the rapid growth of First Colony.

The planned community has a population of 20,000 now and will soon increase to more than 100,000. Maintaining top-quality grounds maintenance work for an operation that's expanding every day requires a firm hand. And as Poe is quick to point out—a fair person who treats people with respect.

WT&T

Olathe "CLEAN SWEEP" TURF SWEEPERS

MODEL 54 HIGH LIFT
LARGE AREA SWEEPER
SWEEPS A 5 FT. SWATH
AND COLLECTS
3 CUBIC YARDS
OF LEAVES, GRASS
AND DEBRIS.
P.T.O. and Tow Type
Available

MAKE A "CLEAN SWEEP" in '85 with an Olathe Sweeper.

OLATHE MANUFACTURING, INC.
100 INDUSTRIAL PARKWAY, INDUSTRIAL AIRPORT, KS 66031

800-255-6438
913-782-4396



Send
for
a
free
brochure.

Circle No. 155

on Reader

Inquiry Card