

# JOB TALK

## People, equipment are vital to flood clean-up in Houston

by Ian Burden

■ Five straight days of thunderstorms in October, 1994 dumped 30 inches of rain on 26 counties in southeast Texas. It was the area's worst recorded flood in history, leaving 15 dead, several missing and 8,000 homeless.

The job of draining flood water from 1,700 square miles of densely-populated land fell on the Harris County Flood Control District. The department has a workforce of 250 who sometimes have to fight angry alligators and water snakes to do their job.

The department has more than 150 mowing units, seven large pieces of specialized equipment that can operate in swamp-like conditions, a fleet of trucks, and a variety of chain saws and machetes. It's their job to control vegetation, make repairs and remove flow-restricting debris from natural and man-made water channels.

Considering the fact that both sides of the drainage system must be maintained, the distance grows to a staggering 6,000 miles of drainage channels.

"Our job is to keep the grass maintained on the channel slopes and remove any debris or trash that is obstructing the flow of

water," says fleet manager Ray Walters. "On a lot of the drainage channels, we will go in with Alamo 10- and 15-foot hydraulic mowers to mow the grass as close as we can get to the water. Then we use 28-foot Alamo Slopemowers that can reach out and cut the grass and weeds right up to the water's edge.

"In other areas, the only way we can get into the channel to work is by using a flat-bottom boat. In that case, we load our chain saws and machetes into the boat and do the work by hand."

The county has an excellent drainage system. Strategically located flood warning sensors send a message back to the Flood Control Center when water begins to rise. A light will then glow on a special map-board showing the location of the potential flooding.

"But it can't take a 25-inch rainfall like we had without some flooding," notes Walters. "I don't know of many areas in the United States that could."

In spite of the unusually heavy rainfall, only one area in the northern section of the country, near Cypress Creek, flooded. "The creek came up in a hurry," Walters says. "Within only three hours, people had six feet of water in their house."

Houston and Harris County has a drainage system that features very beautiful, park-like sections. The lush growth of various plants and trees provide a backdrop for bike and hiking trails. "Some of our bayous in the city are like park lands," notes Walters. "On the other hand, Buffalo Bayou is a natural waterway that looks like a jungle river with trees hanging over it. There are snakes in that bayou as big as your leg."

The Flood Control District, forever looking for better ways of

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maintaining the drainage system, is taking a hard look at its chemical spraying operations.

"We will probably do a lot less spraying this coming year than we have in the past," says Walters. "We are re-evaluating chemicals and how they are applied because we are concerned about the over-kill of vegetation in some areas that causes erosion. We have people working on a new Turf Establishment Program that is working out pretty good for us. We are planting new seedlings and grasses that are natural to our area. Of course, we will have to maintain it with mowers after it gets a good growth."

—The author is vice president of marketing for Alamo, Seguin, Texas, manufacturers of McCormel, Mott, Terrain King and Triumph outdoor power equipment.



A 15-foot mower clears vegetation along flood control drainage canals.

Photo courtesy Alamo