

**M**ost of us have a period of down time during the winter, or at some other slow point during the year. Given the "steady beat" of our production season, these down periods are often the only times we can get serious about equipment maintenance.

Here are some tips from the pros on how to reduce your "in-season" maintenance costs:

**1) Inspect each piece of critical equipment** with key staff members. Make a list of the standard maintenance practices which must be performed as well as a list of special repairs required.

Have more than one knowledgeable person inspect the equipment, since one person may find a problem overlooked by another.

**2) Put each list into a "to-do" format** which is left on that piece of equipment. As the needed repairs are completed, they should be checked off, dated and initialed by whomever performs the work.

**3) Keep a file for** each piece of equipment. All of these files should be kept in the same place. The files should contain important manuals (operators and parts), warranty information, copies of all previous maintenance records, and repair bills. One person should be in charge of keeping these files up to date and in good order.

**4) Replace parts that regularly wear out** or otherwise fail. Virtually every piece of equipment I have ever owned has one or more of these parts. Don't take the chance of not being able to quickly obtain a part in season, when you can easily find one in down periods.

**5) Each of your trucks** should have a small tool box stocked with commonly-used parts such as spark plugs, cotter pins and fuses. There's no reason to lose valuable production time because

an employee must return to the shop for an easily replaceable part.

**6) Talk with industry colleagues** before buying a totally new piece of equipment. Usually, they're more than willing to share this information with you. From the school of hard knocks, I have learned that certain brands or types of equipment tend to have more than their fair share of maintenance problems. Also, listen to your employees. They'll tell you a lot about the equipment's strengths and weaknesses. Remember, they have to use this equipment. Also, take advantage of Field Days for some "tire kicking."

**7) Recognize your maintenance limitations.** This is especially important when it comes to serious engine repairs. Develop a good working relationship with a mechanic (if you don't have one) or your dealer. This brings up an additional point that can save you a lot of headaches. When buying a new piece of equipment, make sure that the dealer can service it. Does the dealer carry an inventory of commonly-used parts? What is the manufacturer's policy for supplying quickly needed parts? Get answers up front.

**8) You or a responsible manager should re-view** the winter maintenance when it's done. Equipment that's wearing out should be scheduled for replacement. This:

- ▶ allows you to budget for needed equipment rather than having to quickly locate emergency cash for new purchases,

- ▶ creates a gradual "aging" of your equipment inventory so that you always have something new coming on line.

An old farmer in eastern Indiana once told me, "A tractor don't break down when it's parked in the barn." True enough, but maintaining that tractor while it's parked in the barn may well keep it from breaking down once you take it to the field! **LM**

## A winter maintenance checklist



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