

What kind of pick-up?

by JERRY ROCHE / Editor-in-Chief

Once you've decided to plow snow for a living (or been delegated it by your superiors), the biggest, most important purchase that faces you is the pick-up truck.

Snow plowing demands more from a pick-up than almost any other activity. Constant—almost abusive—changing gears, sometimes rapidly, with extra weight on the front (snow and the plow) and sometimes on the back (a load of de-icing material and/or spreader) means you need heavy duty equipment.

Here are some things you'll want to consider before purchasing a pick-up

truck that will be used to plow snow:

► **Is it a 4x4?** If you're going to be plowing snow, forget buying a 4x2. You need four-wheel drive. Period.

► **Does it come with a "snow plow prep package?"** Many brands of pick-ups can be purchased with such options as heavy duty front torsion bars (to support the weight of the plow), a 100-ampere alternator (for running electronic plow controls, standard and optional lights and heater, all at once), a heavy duty radiator, a heavy duty oil cooler and/or a transmission cooler.

"There are a lot

of what we call 'high-duty cycles' involved in plowing snow," says Ken Mussman of GMC Trucks. "Landscapers can order our snow-plowing VYU option for our ½-ton, ¾-ton and one-ton Sierra pick-ups for \$118. The important thing is to specifically order the snow plow prep package."

► **What kind of torque does the vehicle produce?**

Horsepower is fine, but a high-torquing engine "will allow you to not have to get a running start to plow a bank of snow," says GMC's Duane Paige. "Horsepower will allow you to go faster when you've started moving, but torque provides the power to push heavy objects."

Most vehicles will have torque ratings of 250-380 foot/lbs.

GMC's Vortec V-8 engine gets 410 foot/lbs. of torque, which is more than a standard V-10 engine, according to Mussman.

However, it is also important that you also buy a truck "with a high numerical axle ratio to get the power to the wheels," adds Ford's Tom Baughman. Ford makes the popular F-Series of pick-ups for snow-plowing.

► **Does it have limited slip differential, non-flotation tires and the same front and rear track width?**

"Limited slip rear differential is a major factor in getting out of situations where the plow might get trapped," says Baughman. "Also, non-flotation tires are the ones that are not very wide so they get down to the pavement. They



Tip #4:

What to look for: four-wheel drive, high torque and a snow plow 'package,' at the very minimum.

should also have a relatively aggressive tread pattern for biting into the pavement once they get to it. And the front and rear track must be the same so the tires will roll in the same rut and you don't lose power by making the front and rear tires both cut a path through the snow."

► Does it come with interior amenities?

"In the Sierra, you can run everything at once," says GMC's Paige. "You don't have to unplug something to do something else. There are three power ports to accommodate a cigarette lighter, a cellular phone or mobile radio and even a portable computer."

A sliding rear window helps in situations where you'll be backing up and the window might be frosted. Good ventilation will help keep you cool (yes, it'll get surprisingly warm under your jacket if you're working the truck hard). As a matter of fact, Ford has a heater/defroster with a halfway stop that allows you to use both at the same time, at enough power that your front window is defrosted and your feet keep toasty.

In the long run, vinyl seats and mats will pay off because it will get wet inside, and any moisture that is retained can quickly ruin the cab.

► What are heavy duty maintenance requirements?

With most pick-ups that are being used for heavy jobs like snow plowing, you will need to perform standard maintenance at narrower intervals. GMC and Ford, for instance, publish two maintenance schedules in each owner's manual: one for everyday light driving and one for heavy duty driving that puts added stress on components.

► **Is expert plow installation available?** Because of the relationship between the airbag (which is normally adjusted to deploy when the truck hits something) and the plow (which normally "hits something" hundreds of times a day), the airbag's trip mechanism must be adjusted so it doesn't blow up in your face everytime you push a load of snow.

"When we develop our vehicles, we engineer them for snow plowing," says Ford's Baughman. "The F Series is engineered to be as friendly as possible with respect to airbag deployment. We did computer modelling and designed 'transparent' snow plow brackets to make the magic of the airbags work."

► **Does the vehicle come with safety equipment, either optional or standard?** Besides four-wheel drive and airbags, you'll want four-wheel anti-lock brakes, running lights—and good back-up lamps for conditions where the back windows might be frosted up.



Four-wheel anti-lock brakes will allow you to hit the brakes on slippery pavement without spinning and yet you'll still be able to steer the vehicle in the desired direction. Four-wheel anti-lock brakes also brake the vehicle quicker than rear-wheel anti-lock brakes—and much quicker than disc brakes.

Running lights come in handy during early-morning hours when the sun hasn't quite peeked over the horizon. There is a danger that the driver may become so involved with his plowing duties that he becomes unaware of other vehicles around him. Special running lights will notify other vehicles of a plowing operation in progress, especially in those hours when other vehicles might be harder to see. "Many of the trucks we sell are white, and snow is white," says Mussmann. "In those situations, it's a good idea to have extra lights."

► **Finally, what about other goodies?** Here are some to consider:

- A block heater like the kind Ford builds into the engine housing. The owner simply unwinds an electrical power cord, plugs it in at night, and when the engine starts in the morning it doesn't take as long to warm up.
- Automatic transmission "so you can pay attention to all the things you have to do," notes Baughman. Because plowing snow is hard work, even from the cab of a pick-up, you'll also probably avoid a lot of sore muscles by the end of the day with an automatic tranny.
- Enough rear payload to carry de-icer and a spreader in the bed. Don't forget, however, that you'll be using the same truck during the summer and might be carrying heavier objects then.
- Most of all—bottom line—the main thing to remember before you buy your snow plowing pick-up truck is best voiced by GMC's Paige:

"The truck you buy should be a smart business investment."