

## Buy mowers with maintenance in mind

*Don't wait until you buy equipment to decide how you'll maintain it. Whether you choose in-house or out-source, your strategy can pay off with longer life and higher efficiency.*

By MARK H. NEIDICH

**B**uying a mower isn't a simple decision. You have to match the equipment to your needs, budget and type of work you perform. Look at the properties you service and determine these before you decide:

▶ Characteristics of the work to be performed (large or small, easy or hard to maintain, mostly mowing or additional services needed, etc.)

- ▶ The size of the properties
- ▶ The type of terrain
- ▶ How quickly you want the work completed on each property
- ▶ How much capital is available.

When you have determined the type of mower you need and how much you can afford, it's time to make the next critical decision — how you will maintain it. Depending on the size of your operation, the type of equipment you buy and the state of your business, this decision can have a huge effect on how profitable and efficient you are.



### Buy for easy maintenance

Purchasing too large of a piece increases cost, while too small of a piece increases maintenance and reduces productivity. You'll get longer use and better return on investment by selecting the right piece of equipment for the job. This also will ensure a satisfactory maintenance history.

A good way to start is learn about your dealers and the type of equipment available to do the work. Take note that most manufacturers have distributors between them and the dealer, so look for dealers that have a strong relationship with their distributor, good parts people and a service department with qualified technicians to

**You have to make a decision about how to maintain your expensive mowing equipment, either in-house or contracted.**

perform warranty and/or service work.

When you pick your equipment, it should be one of your dealer's most popular models. This helps to assure parts availability by the dealer. He also knows the machine, so he can tell you the pros and cons. His service department will also be familiar with that model.

### Standardize your equipment

I recommend you stay away from first-year equipment. Invariably, there will be engineering and production problems re-

# MOWING guide

lated to new designs. And as the owner, you will be in the middle of warranty problems, increased downtime and lower employee productivity, which may all result in higher costs for you. When looking at brands of equipment, commonality allows you to standardize maintenance proce-

can be strengthened

- ▶ parts life can be monitored
- ▶ parts interchange can be increased and inventory costs lowered
- ▶ vendor repair can be more easily measured
- ▶ mechanics can be trained as a group

turer recommendations to initiate scheduled maintenance intervals and apply historical data on breakdowns and use to fine-tune the maintenance cycle.

## Maintenance: In-house or outsource?

There are many reasons pro and con for in-house or outsourced fleet maintenance: the size of your fleet, the type of equipment, complexity, expected life, warranty and hours operated per year. Does your equipment dealer offer a service agreement for your particular type of equipment? Do you have a shop area, tools and equipment available for repair, parts inventory and qualified people? All this plays a part in determining if you will outsource completely, do it part-time, or make it full-time in-house.

The best method is a balance between in-house and vendor maintenance. While I think in-house maintenance is more desirable than outside, remember that work tends to expand to fill the allotted time. With in-house maintenance, time limits must be set. Also, a complete maintenance shop is expensive — the space, tools and people all add to the cost. Peaks and valleys in the workload complicate scheduling and may add to the costs.

Also consider that certain technical skills are increasingly harder to obtain and more expensive to hire.

The best alternative is to evaluate your current capabilities and survey vendor locations that will complement and support your operation. This will reduce your shop costs, reduce your need for technical skills and allow you to use your in-house operation in the most productive manner. □

*Mark Neidich is fleet manager at Groundmasters, Cincinnati, OH, where he is responsible for a 45 trucks and 400 pieces of equipment, including tractors, turf spraying equipment, commercial mowers, small power equipment, snow plows, salt spreaders, trailers, and landscape renovation equipment.*

## THE IN-HOUSE OPTION

### PRO

Little or no downtime  
Scheduled workload  
Equipment/truck maximum availability, which allows maximum use, giving greatest return on investment

### CON

Skilled people needed to do the work  
Workload variations  
Shop set-up needed  
Tools & equipment needed  
Parts inventory needed  
Some investment tied up in inventory  
Training needed

## THE OUTSOURCE OPTION

### PRO

Don't need highly skilled technical people  
No training necessary  
Warranty on work performed  
No special tools, parts required  
Parts inventory dollars free for other uses

### CON

Time travel adds to maintenance costs  
More complex scheduling  
Downtime  
Need to qualify vendor

dures, stock fewer parts and train and monitor in-house or vendor labor.

Standardization also helps hold costs your constant. If and when abnormal repairs occur, you can apply this to your other units and inspect for similar features. Specific advantages to standardization include:

- ▶ operators can be trained as a group
- ▶ productivity can be more effectively measured
- ▶ manufacturer support in warranty

▶ short-term costs are more easily measured and long-term costs are more accurately predicted.

▶ cost comparisons can be made with similar types of equipment.

Once you have the right equipment, maintaining it for maximum performance is integral to low life-cycle cost. Planned maintenance, whether it's performed by a vendor or in-house, will give you equipment availability and maximize use, at minimum cost. Fleets should use manufac-