Maintenance: Spend Time Now for a Better Start Next Spring

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After a long harvest season it may be difficult to think of pulling the machines you use in the shop and performing maintenance. However, spending time this fall and winter can save major headaches when you get machines out next spring. Cleaning, routine maintenance, and critical component inspection improves machine function and increases service life. Consider these suggestions and reminders on cleaning and maintenance steps.

The saying "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" applies to machinery as well. Once the field season is over, or even during the season, cleaning machines provides many benefits. First, there are safety concerns when running machines with dust or plant material accumulations in places that can get hot. Machinery fires are often caused by dry organic material accumulating near hot components.

Another thing to consider – finding and identifying mechanical problems is easier when the machine is relatively clean. Hydraulic leaks and excessive wear are easier to locate. Also, working on machinery is more pleasant when there are not piles of plant material and grease and oil everywhere you place your hands and tools.

Finally, putting away clean machines during winter storage helps discourage rodents from finding and living in them. Removing plant material from the machines will remove the food and bedding source, reducing the chance of wires and components being chewed and disabled. At a bare minimum, use an air hose to blow off the machines before maintenance and storage. A better effort would be blowing the machine off with air, then using a pressure washer and soap to clean all surfaces. Remove or open all shields and panels to ensure the internals of the machine are as clean as possible.

Another area to consider spending some time cleaning would be the cabs of self-propelled machines. Cleaning control panels, seats, and floors and adding rodent deterrent will prolong the life of the cab and make the machine nice to get in and operate next spring. Consider cleaning or replacing the in-cab air filter as well.

Once the machines have been cleaned, I would also suggest spending some time performing general maintenance. Keeping the machine operating at peak performance requires proper inspection and lubrication. General maintenance on the engines of self-propelled machines includes changing engine oil at the proper intervals, changing or cleaning engine air filters, ensuring the fuel is winterized for storage by adding fuel additives to prevent diesel gelling or the gasoline going bad, and ensuring engine coolant is incapable of freezing at low temperatures expected in your area.

Lubrication of moving parts is another area to focus on. Greasing the machine before storage will save time next spring, so ensure all grease locations are at the proper fill level. Also, lubricate cutter bars and other parts requiring oil. This will not only keep parts moving freely during storage but also prevents rust. Any other mechanical components or gear boxes that run in oil should be checked for oil level and/or have oil changed at correct service intervals.

Finally, check air pressure in all tires before storing. Proper tire inflation will minimize flat spots from forming while sitting stationary over several months. As stated before, doing a thorough machine component inspection during servicing will help identify any parts that are worn, broken, or need replacing.

Taking some time during the fall to clean and service machines before storage is a best management practice to ensure your machines are ready to go next spring. Doing this work when you have time in the fall and over winter will save stress and headaches when you are ready to start forage harvest next year.