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PHOTO: DIETZ HYDROSEEDING

### Choices in Hydroseeding Equipment

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*Size and power must be right for the job—and bigger isn't always be*

By Bill Tice

Many people think of hydroseeding technology as being a fairly recent dev but Norman Gray II is happy to tell you differently. The 67-year-old from M runs Transit Seeding Inc., a hydroseeding company that was started by hi Norman Gray I, in 1950, and incorporated in 1951. Today Norman Gray III active in the family business.

“My father had a small business shop called Gray Engineering, and in that built two hydroseeding machines, including his first one in 1950,” recalls N II. “Both machines were 1,000-gallon models, and they were the first hydrc machines we used. They were in service until 1965 when we acquired our machine, a 1,500-gallon unit powered by a Ford six-cylinder engine.”

For Norman Gray II, the hydroseeding business is in his blood, and despit college to earn a degree in engineering and then working for the Common Massachusetts in highway and bridge construction, he couldn't stay away grew up with. “I have been around this business for a very long time,” note remember my father discussing his business opportunities at the dinner ta

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was very young, and then I started helping out in the business during the summer after school when I was about 15 years old. One of the projects we worked on was at Pease Air Force Base in Newington, NH. I remember mowing the grass along the airstrip the day before they opened the base and having the Thunderbirds overhead.”

Transit Seeding worked on a number of air force bases and other government contracts, and still does government work today. In addition, the company does private work such as residential lawns for large homes, soccer and football fields, and landfills. “Until 1982, we did a full spectrum of landscaping services. But in 1982, determining the future of the business fell to me and it was my task to move forward. I decided to specialize in hydroseeding and dropped the labor-intensive types of work,” says Norman Gray II. “People said ‘How are you going to get by doing only hydroseeding?’ but after three or four years, we developed a tremendous following and never looked back. I feel you need to specialize in one thing well.”

Transit Seeding looks at its equipment in the same way, and that first Bowie hydroseeding unit the company purchased in 1965 proved to be the start of a long tradition. Transit Seeding still runs Bowie equipment and today has one model, the 3000 Imperial, which has a capacity of 3,000 gallons. “We have operated in the past, but for our small corner of the world, we find one model enough,” notes Norman Gray II. “We like how the Bowie machine is configured for filling, drafting water, and for storage. We can load enough materials on the machine to do five or six acres, and we can do up to 10 acres a day if everything is climate right. About five years ago we did a 60-acre job at Logan Airport in Boston. We parked a trailer at the airport and loaded up the supplies we needed for seed. When we ran out, we would go back to the trailer and load the machine up again. Because we could carry so much product, we did the job in just five days.”

On the other side of the country, Ron Dietz also likes his Bowie hydroseeding equipment. Dietz is the president of Dietz Hydroseeding Co., a Sylmar, CA company that has been in business since 1979. Dietz specializes in hydroseeding works primarily in California. The company runs up to four crews at one time with three employees on each crew. They complete a lot of habitat restoration projects for Caltrans (the California Department of Transportation) and for the state government.

Dietz runs primarily Bowie Industries’ 3000 model Hydro-Mulchers and has other models, but he stresses that for his projects he needs to have the machines available even if it takes two to six months for delivery. “When we need a new machine, we talk down with the engineers at Bowie and we specify what we want. We add our own touches and we reposition items on the machine so that we can maximize productivity in the market. Bowie doesn’t even start production on our machines until they get our specifications. Their out-of-the-box products are excellent machines, but we like buying a new car or truck. You can pick one out on the lot that might be what you want and drive it home the same day, or you can order one from the factory and you may have to wait a couple of months for it, but you will get exactly what you want.”

Jay Selby also works with his favorite manufacturer, Finn Corporation, to get what he wants in a machine. Selby, who owns Selby's Soil Erosion Control Co. in California—just north of Sacramento—has nine hydroseeding units and six straw blowers, mainly from Finn. "We have one of the big bale straw blowers from Finn," says Selby, who took over the company from his father, Jay Sr., nine years ago. "The big bales are predominantly seen on the West Coast, and Finn is in the East, so I phoned them up and said 'Why don't you make us your research and development people for this product?' Now we are looking at ways to make the machine smaller, as the bales weigh 1,000 pounds each and right now we need a forklift to load them. We want to find a way to make the machine self-loading so that we don't have to use the strawblower and a forklift on the work site. That will mean less manpower and will save us money."



Photo: Dietz Hydroseeding

In addition to having input into the design, Selby also likes to run Finn Corporation because it allows him to keep a small inventory on hand. "Many of the parts are universal from one of their machines to another," notes Selby. "That means we can carry fewer parts and have less cost in parts."

The mixing capabilities and the portability of the equipment are also important factors in Selby's choice. "For our projects, we have to put a lot of material into the tank, and the Finn machines can handle this. They spray further than any of the other machines we have, yet the machine isn't bulky or oversized. It's actually a very sleek machine that mounts on a truck, and they have made the best use of the space by putting the tank in the right place. "

As for maintenance, Selby says the Finn model is easy to work on and maintenance can be performed by his two on-staff mechanics. Selby employs 20 to 35 people in his business, depending on the time of year, and works on projects all over northern California. Right now the company is working on an 800-acre revegetation project with major streams running through it, so from an environmental perspective, it is a real showcase for us," says Selby. "I find the environmental part of the business very rewarding. Here in California, the storm drains go right into the ocean, so that we are doing what we can to protect our oceans, while allowing development to continue."

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Heikes Farms Inc. is also a family-run business, which today is operated by Heikes of Lakeville, MN, just outside the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. "Heikes specializes in erosion control seeding and uses strawblowers exclusively. We run all Haybusters from DuraTech Industries in North Dakota," explains Heikes. "We have two of the newer 2100 series models, and two older models. We do a lot of highway work, and we use between 7,000 and 8,000 round bales of hay every year. We find what works the best for us is to come along first with a tractor that has a seeder on the front and a tiller on the back to work the seed into the soil. Then we come along with the Haybuster and blow straw onto the surface, which holds the seed in place."

place until it germinates.”

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Heikes fondly recalls his first venture into straw blowing and is quite happy to now have a company like DuraTech behind him. “We did our first job with a square bale mulcher that was made from a silo blower, and I have to say I am glad that I still have arms. The first thing I did was tell my dad that I was going back to milking cows,” jokes Heikes. “For the type of work we are doing, we feel that the Haybuster is the best product on the market, and we have great dealer support from Myron Boll of Boll Sales in Howard Lake, MN.”



Photo: Selby's Soil I

Today, Heikes has up to 25 employees, and is working on a number of projects, including a stretch of highway near Roch that will require approximately 800 acres of erosion control seeding, 100 a installation, and 150,000 linear feet of silt fence. Heikes started the project doesn't expect to finish it until 2006.

Bob St. Jacques, owner of Four Seasons Landscaping Inc. in Windsor, CT Reinco Hydrograssers because he likes the size of the tanks, and he likes agitation for the slurry rather than the mechanical agitation that is used in hydroseeding machines.

“Right now we have a Reinco 2,500-gallon truck-mounted model,” explains Jacques, whose company employs between 25 and 30 people during peak seasons. “We specialize in landscape construction installation, and we do a fair amount of hydroseeding and erosion control work, mostly for commercial and industrial sites. When we got into hydroseeding, we started out with a Reinco 800-gallon machine, then stepped up to a 1,500-gallon machine before buying the 2,500-gallon model. One of the reasons we bought Reinco to start with was because of the jet agitation system. We wanted something basic, and with the jet agitation system, you have less maintenance. The system is like a big Jacuzzi that recycles the water, and as long as the pump is running, we get agitation. After our first Reinco, we decided we liked the company and the service. The factory is just three hours away in New Jersey, and we buy from them, so we can get parts shipped overnight by UPS if we need them. We have a good, long-term relationship, so we really don't have a need to switch to another brand.”

St. Jacques also likes the range of sizes available on the 2,500-gallon machine. “We use both the jet and the hose for jobs, and a combination works well for us. We have about 300 feet of hose on the truck, and we can reel it out onto the hose, giving us a total of about 500 feet of hose when we need it. We just finished a job at a distribution center in Plainfield, CT that was about 25 acres and required about



Photo: Selby's Soil Erosion Control Co.

square feet of seeding. About half done with hydroseeding, but because we included retention ponds, we couldn't truck in, so we had to use hoses. It took us about five working days."

Four Seasons has created a niche for itself by taking on challenging jobs like something St. Jacques takes pride in. "We enjoy the work because every job is something we never seem to get the easy jobs. We have ones that are on a cliff or rock face where we have to pull hose up a hill. But it—the harder it is, the better we like it."

For St. Jacques, his crew is a definite asset in this type of work. "We have been in business since 1980 and we have a number of long-term employees, including Glenn French, who looks after our equipment maintenance and is our foreman in hydroseeding. But Glenn also helps out with specifying equipment and working with Reinco's engineers when we buy a new hydroseeding unit. With Glenn's help, we are able to get the machine just the way we want it."

Further south and to the west, Bryan Steele of Mighty Green Hydromulch in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas likes both the jet-agitation machines and the mechanical machines and says people shouldn't be too concerned with which is better. Steele, who has been in business since 1985 and does only hydroseeding, has been using Easy Lawn hydroseeding equipment, and recently purchased a C95 trailer-mounted machine from the Delaware-based manufacturer.



Photo: Selby's Soil Erosion Control Co.

"Some people in this business think the jet-agitation machines don't spray as far as the mechanical agitation machines and won't handle as thick of a slurry," explains Steele. "I have used both types, and the analogy I like to use is that the jet-agitation spray more of a cream of wheat slurry, while the mechanical system will spray an oatmeal. The bottom line is that 90% of our customers don't get caught between the two, they just want the product down. The machines I have had in the past were jet-agitation machines, and the new one I have just bought is a mechanical machine. The reason for going mechanical this time is that with the implementation of tight stormwater regulations, the industry is moving more toward erosion control than just seeding. With the machine I have purchased, I can run the thicker slurry when I need to, but I can also run the thinner cream of wheat when that is all that is needed."

Steele also appreciates the size of the Easy Lawn C95 as he says its 950-gallon tank and the size of the machine gives him



Photo: Selby's Soil Erosion Control Co.

capacity to be competitive on big jobs still allows him to compete on small jobs as well. "With this machine we have the best of both worlds. It is a mid-sized machine because it is trailer mounted, you can get a commercial driver's license to operate it, you do with the big machines. I can do larger jobs, but I can also do the smaller jobs where a big machine couldn't fit on the driveway."

For Ron Dean, getting equipment on a residential driveway isn't an issue. Dean handles equipment development for American Civil Contractors (ACC), a company that works on huge construction projects around the country, including high-profile highway work in mountainous terrain.

"We have worked on some very large jobs, including the Guanella Pass project for the Federal Highway Administration," explains Dean from his Littleton, CO, office. "The pass is a popular tourist attraction because of its scenery and 11,600-foot altitude. As the reclamation team, we go along behind the highway construction crews and revegetate everything. On this project, that includes an alpine sod salvage program, which we won an award for, and 70 acres of hydroseeding. We are also installing erosion control logs and silt fence."



Photo

The Guanella Pass project, a two-year commitment for ACC, began in July 2004. "We were really interested in this project because we do a lot of high-altitude work, and this is an area where we have expertise," adds Dean. ACC employs 700 people in Colorado and another 1,000 around the rest of the country. "We have completed many projects for the Colorado Department of Transportation and for ski resorts."



Photo

ACC ordered a new hydroseeding machine in May 2004 from Apex Curb & Turf LLC in Clarkston, WA, and the Apex JL 4000 was delivered just in time for the Guanella Pass project. "One of the reasons we were motivated to buy this machine was because of the cuts and fills in the Guanella Pass job," notes Dean. "These slopes are 100 feet long, and with regular hydroseeding equipment, we would have had to use 400 feet of hose. With the Apex machine, we need less hose, and any time laying hose, you are saving money. Also, this machine has more beaters,

faster, and it chews up the blend better. The pump is designed to handle thick slurries and bonded fiber matrix, which is harder to shoot, and the pump is cooled, which is better in the higher altitudes we like to work in. We felt this would keep us on the cutting edge of the industry, which can result in getting bids,”

John Larson, who owns Apex Curb & Turf, started developing hydroseeding equipment in 1995, when he found the products from other manufacturers were not meeting specific needs. “I started a hydroseeding business in 1994 and owned many other manufacturers,” says Larson. “I have a background in mechanical engineering. I built my first one in 1995, and then produced my first stainless steel, high pressure machine in 1999.”

Larson wanted the ability to shoot farther and to shoot thicker slurries. The machine that ACC purchased produces 23,000 inch-pounds torque, while the pump produces 600 gallons per minute at 175 psi. It also has a twin cannon system, allowing operators to work at the same time. “We can shoot up to 300 feet depending on elevation and, if necessary, we can have two guys shooting up to 250 feet on both sides of the road at the same time,” adds Larson.

Apex still works on hydroseeding projects and, of course, uses its own equipment to do projects in Washington, Idaho, and Montana,” says Larson. “Last year we worked on 50 federal and state contracts, and every time we are out on a job we document everything and look to see how we might improve our equipment. We generally run three trucks on the bigger jobs, and we can do 25 to 30 acres depending on conditions. “

With all of the different types of hydroseeding equipment on the market, so much to the business has many decisions to make—from the size of the tank to the agitation system—but one thing almost all hydroseeding professionals agree on: anyone wanting to get into the business needs to do the research and buy the right machine for the planned applications.

“Anyone just starting out should spend at least a year working with someone who is established so that they can determine what size and type of machine will be most profitable in the market they want to target,” notes ACC’s Dean. “If you are going to specialize in residential lawns, you are going to want a very different machine than if you are doing the big commercial jobs. You need to make sure you tailor your equipment to meet your customer’s requirements.”

*Bill Tice is based in Blaine, WA.*

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