

Clean, winterize farm equipment to extend its life

It appears most of us finally have the crops out of the field for another season. It has been a difficult thing to harvest alfalfa, corn, and safflower while dodging storms in recent weeks. Though we have lost some feed quality to storms this season, we must gratefully admit that the harvest has been bounteous. Most hay barns are full of forage and the corn silage bunkers are stacked higher than they have ever been. It has been wonderful to have ample irrigation water during the past season.

Though most of us are ready to park much of our farm equipment for a few months, we must remember that spring will be here quickly and the equipment must be ready to go. The care we provide our machinery, such as proper cleaning, maintenance and storage not only increases equipment reliability and performance, it can also improve resale value. Farmers who properly winterize farm equipment now will be rewarded with a reduction in start-up time next spring. In recent conversation with my good friend Gary Clawson, I was reminded that we have only 200 days before we will be cutting first crop alfalfa.

The following winter storage suggestions come from various Extension bulletins, but should never supersede the recommendations found in equipment operator's manuals.

Be sure to change the oil and perform regular service. The hot, dry weather we have recently experienced makes oil changes necessary. Clean engine oil will reduce internal engine corrosion during storage. Clean or replace air filters, replace fuel filters and lubricate bearings and joints to maximize the life and efficiency of your machinery. Check antifreeze for correct freezing temperature. Remember that antifreeze, like engine oil, has a lifespan. Merely adding more coolant may not be enough to fully protect your investment.

Inflate tires to recommended pressure to reduce sidewall damage. Before storing tillage implements remove soil and apply appropriate rust preventive material, then store with soil engaging components raised or on blocks to prevent rust. Hydraulic cylinders should not be stored fully extended. If temperatures increase, hydraulic oil will be confined and high pressure may cause damage to the hydraulic system.

All planters, drills, air seeders and combines need to be cleaned out. Be sure all grain and plant material left in the grain tank and augers is removed. This will reduce rusting and make it less attractive to mice and other pests. It is sometimes possible to remove more than a bushel of grain even after a combine seems to be clean. Trapped grain attracts rodents, who often then make a meal of electrical wiring, leading to short circuits or other electrical problems. Reduce tension on belts to reduce stretch and increase belt life. Be sure to follow storage instructions in the operator's manual for removing seed plates and other components to relieve pressure on seals, brushes, and seed plates. This will minimize warping and misshaped air seals and seed plates. Remove soil from all furrow openers to reduce rust and improve performance next season.

Balers need to have any partial bales and all plant material removed to minimize rusting. Follow the operator's manual for instructions on reducing pressure on baler belts or other components. Compressed air is a great way to clean hard to reach places and may be a better choice than water. When water is needed to clean surfaces, use only moderate pressure and mild soap.

Cleaning farm equipment with a power washer is great for removing dust and soil. Be careful, however, and avoid direct contact with seals when using high-pressure washers. Use compressed air after washing to help dry surfaces, and operate machinery for 10 to 20 minutes to help shed excess water from hard to reach places. Repaint worn surfaces with spray paint to protect from corrosion.

Proper battery storage can protect batteries from deterioration. Even a small current drain can eventually discharge batteries and cause them to freeze in cold weather. Consider removing batteries to convenient storage where they can receive a periodic charge. Clean all connections and coat terminals with a thin layer of grease to prevent corrosion.

Where possible, store equipment in a building. If a building is not available, at least cover equipment with a well secured tarp. This will always improve equipment performance and resale value.