

Save fuel when removing snow

FORGIVE the pun, but the snow accumulation this winter simply pales in comparison to last year. However, current fuel prices are noticeably higher, and further increases are expected. You never know exactly how long the snow will last here in the Midwest, so ISU Farm Energy offers a few easy steps for saving energy during the remaining winter.



Farm Energy

By DANA PETERSEN

Did last year's record-breaking snowstorms force you to re-think your snow

removal routine? Whether you upgraded your equipment already or if you're still holding out, snow removal may provide an opportunity to share a few winter chores (and expenses) with a friendly neighbor.

If one party is equipped with a tractor-mounted snowblower and the other has a 60-inch plow blade, sharing equipment may help both parties to be more efficient

with their time and fuel in a large storm. If you and your neighbors are already sharing duties or machinery, maintain clear communication regarding guidelines for fueling and maintenance. Engine care is critical, especially during the cold weather.

"The winter routine often requires a block heater for your motor," says Mark Hanna, ISU Extension ag engineer. "Assuming 10 cents per kilowatt-hour, installing a two-hour timer for that heater can save you a dollar a day with a 1,000-watt block heater versus leaving the heater plugged in overnight."

Use a tractor or a truck?

Electric savings help a little, but diesel costs add up even more quickly. It goes without saying that every farmstead is unique, and winter is no exception. Site-specific terrain, windbreaks and building placement may influence your snow-moving needs and limitations. Combine those factors with the variability of wind direction, moisture and projected snow accumulation, and soon your heavy-duty horsepower is called to action.

Some pieces of machinery are better suited to particular types of snow removal. Sleet, ice and slushy, heavy snow can be cleared with a 60- or 72-inch plow blade. If your property has room to pile the snow, you may be able to use a blade mounted to a ¾-ton truck, but there are drawbacks.

Using a truck to push snow is hard on the engine and transmission, and the limited maneuverability results in overlapping and excess fuel use. By comparison, a plow blade mounted to a four-wheel-drive tractor allows you to make tighter turns, capture more horsepower and use less fuel.

Tractors have advantages

When considering fuel efficiency, the slower pace of operating the tractor conserves fuel by harnessing its torque and horsepower. It is safer and more fuel efficient to maintain a slow, steady pace when moving snow instead of burning excess fuel with a heavy foot. Safe driving on and off the farmstead is especially important when the kids are eager to sled or climb all over your fresh piles of snow.

Another advantage of moving snow with a tractor is versatility. A front-end loader can be used to dig through deep drifts. Other attachments, such as a blade or a blower, can also be rear-mounted to the same tractor. This allows the operator to move more snow with fewer passes.

For heavy snow accumulation, a blower moves the snow quickly and easily. If your local snowfall is intermittent, a three-point, rear-mounting blower that attaches to a tractor's PTO is simple and straightforward. By comparison, a front-mounted snowblower typically has a more complicated mounting mechanism that uses hydraulics. Snowblowers are helpful for maintaining long driveways that are prone to drifting snow, but gusting winds may compromise the blower's reach.

Equipment makes the work easier, but a good manager knows that careful winter planning truly pays dividends. You never know how long that snow will last!

Petersen is program coordinator for the Farm Energy Initiative, sponsored by the Iowa Energy Center.

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