Power Mowers and Operators

Ernest Coffin
Wayne County Road Supervisor

A few years ago a law was passed by the legislature requiring highway departments to mow the weeds along the county highways. This is another one of those tasks thrust upon highway departments for which no additional funds are made available to take care of the added cost. This seems to be a habit, not only of the legislature, but also of John Q. Public, who constantly wants more service without additional cost.

Nevertheless, it is our task, and I can think of very few things that really help the appearance of a road more than mowing the weeds, especially when they get so high that one almost has to part the weeds before the road can be found.

To do the job right and accomplish the real purpose of eliminating weeds, roadsides should be mowed three times a year. In the average Indiana county where we have about 1,800 acres of roadside, continual mowing is impossible. Hence, in most cases, if we get the roadsides mowed once, we consider ourselves lucky; and if we do it twice, we consider it a very good job. I like to start mowers (depending upon the season) early in June and continue mowing until the first of September.

For a number of years I tried hiring mowers to cut weeds by the mile, some roads requiring one round, and some wider roads two rounds per mile. This method had its advantages. It did not take part of the regular men at the time of year when they were most needed for other work. It also permitted the hiring of men who needed work in different townships, giving a wider distribution of money. This worked fairly well for a while, but finally the disadvantages so far outnumbered the advantages that I had to completely abandon this method of cutting weeds. The complaints came mostly from that small percentage of property owners who mowed their own weeds and who argued that the county was paying someone for the work they already had done, and that this method of hiring weed mowers should be discouraged.

Type of Equipment

The only thing left to do was to buy equipment. I asked a number of you men who had been using motorized equipment about kind, length
of bar, etc. From experience you had found that the small tractor with a five-foot mowing bar, with some kind of a dual or triple safety, was the best equipment. Most of the recommendations were for five-foot cutting bars.

We have purchased five small-type tractor mowers with power lifts and triple safety devices. Three of these are equipped with five-foot bars and two with six-foot. But to you who have not purchased your equipment and contemplate doing so, I would strongly recommend bars no longer than five feet.

Mowing weeds along the road is a far different problem than mowing in a field, and I find the hydraulic lifts on most small-type tractor mowers are exactly the same size, whether the bars are 5, 6, or 7 feet. Adding one foot to the bar length increases the weight to be lifted by about 25 pounds. This extra weight is very difficult to handle. I would also recommend mowing equipment of the same make. This helps greatly in carrying repair parts, sickles, etc. A good supply of sickles, sickle guards, and other parts should be provided in advance of the mowing season. A grinding device for sharpening sickles is essential. The more uniform the equipment, the easier it is to handle.

Selecting Operators

Last and by no means least in importance is the selection of operators. Some operators will easily mow twice as many weeds with half as many repairs as other operators. The average town boy with no mower experience is a poor operator. Too much stress cannot be put on whom you pick to operate your mowers.

After all this, having selected the method you wish to follow, having purchased the kind of equipment, and having secured the best type of operators, you are ready to start the job about the first week of June and continue until school starts in September. With one mower to each 125 miles of road, you should have done a fairly good job, as far as county highway mowing can be done.