

# Fleet Management Makes Cents



Source: [www.TurfMagazine.com](http://www.TurfMagazine.com)

Performing scheduled PM, based on solid recordkeeping, keeps trucks rolling and equipment working

Fleet management is the management of a company's vehicle fleet, including commercial motor vehicles such as cars, vans and trucks. Landscape and lawn care companies rely upon trucks to transport laborers, mowers, construction equipment and materials, such as mulch and fertilizer, to job sites.



Equipment and Parts Manager Joe Pesce relies upon his 25 years of experience in equipment rental and purchasing in working with BIO Landscape & Maintenance's shop and field personnel.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BIO LANDSCAPE & MAINTENANCE, INC.

It would be practically impossible to find a landscape company that doesn't owe its existence and survival upon the reliability of its service trucks – and a wide variety of trucks it is. Service vehicles used in the trade range from crew-cab pickups, a staple of almost every company, to the 38,000-pound, 60-cubic-yard material blowing monsters that are used to dispense yards of material in a matter of minutes. Not many landscape companies can afford (or need) a fleet of these giant labor savers.

BIO Landscape & Maintenance, Inc., a Yellowstone Landscape Group Co., Houston, Texas, is not your typical landscape company. Founded 30 years ago as a liquid application company, it's long since evolved into a multiservice landscape leader.

Joe Pesce is the company's equipment and parts manager. He came to the position more than 10 years ago after many years of fleet and equipment maintenance experience. Obviously, he has to be very organized considering how many trucks, mowers and tractors the company's employees use in performing a variety of landscape services every workday. Fleet management has to be systemized, by the numbers, emphasizes Pesce.

For example, the company's gasoline-powered trucks receive preventive maintenance (PM) every 5,000 miles and its diesel-powered vehicles every 7,000 miles. In the company's case this work is performed by company mechanics. Because of the company's proven maintenance capabilities, and through a special dealer arrangement, BIO Landscape and Maintenance, Inc. is allowed to do its own PM on its Chevy trucks and still maintain the manufacturer warranty.

## **Mutual respect, cooperation**

Fleet management also requires a high degree of field personnel training, and a high level of cooperation between field supervisors and a company's mechanic(s), or in the case of very large companies, the mechanics and the shop manager. BIO recognizes its shop personnel's contributions to the efficient delivery of its landscape services.



Is your maintenance shop as clean and orderly as this one? How about your company vehicles? Carlos Jiminez realizes the importance of keeping his work area clean and organized.

"A shop mechanic is a prestigious job in our company. It might be a blue-collar job, but these men are dedicated and they love the idea of being cross-trained," says Pesce.

Many smaller companies can't afford an in-house mechanic, of course, and must sub out PM. Regardless of their size, all companies have to develop a system to maintain their service vehicles and equipment to minimize the possibility of breakdowns and lost production. Obviously, there must be order to these systems. Data such as miles driven, services performed and any and all repairs should be updated regularly. Some large companies use fleet maintenance software to track, record and organize this information.

An increasingly popular option for companies with more than a few service vehicles is a GPS fleet tracking system. These systems record real-time truck usage, including speed, idle time and fuel usage, as well as how much time a truck is at a certain location. Companies have many vendors to choose from. And, all of them make essentially the same claims: GPS tracking reduces fuel expenses, increases productivity, increases new business opportunities, monitors after-hours use, and aids in locating stolen or lost equipment.

Generally, most operations can get by just fine with a simple system they develop on their own. Many use an Excel spreadsheet to monitor vehicle usage, maintenance, repairs and downtime.

As we all know, words have many meanings and can be misinterpreted, but numbers have only one meaning. Faithfully recording numbers such as miles driven, maintenance and repair activities (especially costs) will go a long way in keeping vehicles on the road. Accurate records also simplify decisions when it comes to either keeping or disposing of vehicles.

## Time to replace

This is called “vehicle cycling.” How and when a company decides to replace trucks depends on variables such as mileage, vehicle type, age and maintenance and repair history. A well-maintained vehicle replacement system helps a company to get optimum performance from its vehicles and enjoy the best resale value. Considerations include vehicle warranties, mileage and the wear and tear the business inflicts on its vehicles. An owner can’t accurately assess the cost of ownership of a particular vehicle without this data, and risks making costly mistakes in not planning and scheduling their replacements.

Unlike many other companies that use trucks for their business, landscape companies also have a fleet of costly and rugged grounds maintenance equipment, including commercial mowers costing more than \$10,000 a unit and tractors costing even more.

The Houston-based firm with four other branches in Texas tracks about a thousand company vehicles and pieces of production equipment week by week. “Everything bigger than a weed eater or a string trimmer has an hour meter,” says Pesce. Each unit also has a unique identifying number and field foremen refer to each piece by number when calling in the number of hours each piece is used. They also use the smartphones they’ve been assigned to take a photograph of any damaged or malfunctioning piece of equipment and send it back to headquarters.

But, it’s not enough just to record vehicle and equipment usage data. A good fleet management program also engages production employees, the people that use the units every day. Companies such as BIO Landscape and Maintenance, Inc. educate employees to the proper and safe use of vehicles and the production equipment. Employees are trained to realize the importance of the vehicles and equipment they use, not only to the company’s fortunes, but to their safety, productivity and, ultimately, their earning potential. When employees understand this they take care of vehicles and equipment, and, when the unexpected happens, can be pretty resourceful in keeping it working in spite of unforeseen troubles.



Pesce recalls one incident when a mower operator, momentarily stymied by a broken belt, braided together some weed eater string he had on his truck, fashioned a new emergency belt and finished the job.

“I definitely wanted to acknowledge that and congratulate him,” recalls Pesce, still incredulous over the laborer’s resourcefulness.

In spite of the company’s careful recordkeeping and programmed PM activities (mower belts are replaced at 100 hours and motor oil changed at 100 hours, etc.), equipment failures do occur. BIO shares this information with equipment manufacturers, who appreciate learning about it, especially if the failures regularly occur on a certain part or under certain conditions. It helps them identify and correct the design or manufacturing defect, says

Pesce.

Because of its fleet and equipment management efforts, the company can get 10 to 15 percent more productivity out each of its vehicles or mowers, feels Pesca. Also, the care that its employees take with their trucks and mowers, and the maintenance and repairs provided by its skilled mechanics, allow it to fetch a higher dollar when it comes time to sell or trade in its used units.

Ron Hall is editor-in-chief of Turf magazine. He has been reporting on service industries, including the landscape/lawn service industry, for the past 27 years. Contact him at [rhall@mooserivermedia.com](mailto:rhall@mooserivermedia.com).