



Lighter on the turf and the wallet

BY JIM GRIBBLE

Lighter is better. That's the new mantra among manufacturers of major equipment for the turf industry. The trend began with mowers and over the past few years has begun to influence vehicle design.

Today's utility vehicles, large and small, are built for a lighter footprint and a softer ride. Those imperatives have led to development of an entirely new category of lightweight work vehicles that borrow engineering from their heavy-duty cousins and handle many of the same chores. They're great for moving people, equipment and small loads of material. Their lower cost per unit appeals particularly to operators purchasing large fleets or expanding existing ones.

All of the major manufacturers have targeted this niche, with several new products hitting the market within the past year. "There's been a shift toward these vehicles because, for what you used to spend per unit on heavy-duty vehicles, you can buy a larger fleet," says Larry Jones, vehicles product manager for Textron Golf, Turf & Specialty Products.

For example, Textron has made improvements to the Jacobsen 1110 Hauler. Like all other Textron, it features two-stage air filtration that uses vortex technology to remove larger particles before they get to the primary air cleaner. "The two-stage system improves engine serviceability and longevity," Jones says.

Feature show

Manufacturers also are striving to improve comfort, convenience and ride to meet end-user needs. Some lightweight vehicles have sprung suspensions and constant-velocity transmissions. Walk-through operator stations allow egress from the right or left. Jones says you can also add an electric bed lift—something that used to be seen only on the larger vehicles.

The thinking that led to lightweight vehicles has driven many of the recent improvements in heavy-duty machines. Among buyers who emphasize long-term value and performance, demand for heavy-duty vehicles remains robust, thanks to a different set of virtues: ease of use, productivity, reliability, and durability. "They're great when you're shorthanded for labor and need to get the absolute most out of a machine," Jones said. "And you generally can count on them lasting many years. Some of our heavy-duty vehicles have been in service for decades and are still on the job."

For increased efficiency and long-term reliability, electronic fuel injection is now standard on most gasoline-powered, heavy-duty vehicles from Cushman. Also standard are automatic transmissions manufactured to automobile-industry standards. In emphasizing automatic over manual-shift models, the company took into account that most American cars are automatics. According to Jones, fewer young people are learning to drive manual-shift cars, and so they need special training to run manual-shift utility vehicles.

Peter Whurr, vice president of product management for Textron Golf and Turf, said the market continues to evolve. "We pay extremely close attention to feedback from end users," Whurr said. "Superintendents and groundskeepers, along with legislation, are driving the evolution in utility vehicle design."

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This article was written by Jim Gribble of Nelson Schmidt, Milwaukee.