

Mechanical Mulchers Groom Trails Faster

Trail grooming in the winter is on the rise.

New Years Day brings hope and resolutions—many of the latter having to do with increased exercise and living healthier. One way to achieve these goals is walking on the abundant trails found within parks nationwide. Maintaining existing trails and creation of new ones is on the agenda of many parks and recreation departments, but the popularity of walking as a form of exercise makes this difficult because the trails are often in use. That is why win-

tertime trail grooming is gaining popularity.

Private contractor Jody Lance of JCL Industries in Molalla, OR, does a fair amount of trail grooming in the winter. Because the trails are largely empty in the winter, he uses that time to show what his tracked mulcher can do. "I can work in snow, sleet, ice, and rain—when rubber tired machines or larger tracked machines can't" says Lance. The nimble Fecon FTX90 (Fecon Inc., www.fecon.com) that he operates offers

a firm grip, but a light footprint. "The machine has good finesse," Lance continues. He can selectively remove trees—if two trees are side-by-side, he can remove one without harming the other. Underbrush can also be removed without damaging the tree or its root structure.

A Virginia contractor uses a similar mulcher to create trails in his area. "We can grind four- to six-in. saplings, which are way to big for a bush hog," says John Sutherland. "We mow slowly, taking a pass in one direction and then come back in the other direction."

With this approach, Sutherland is able to grind stumps down to and below ground level, so that the trail can be maintained with a bush hog.

Alex Stout of Lackawana County Parks in Pennsylvania used to oversee trail creation and maintenance when it was done by hand. "If we could get in with a machine and mow trails we would do so," says Stout, "but once vegetation was too big, we couldn't get in with those tractors. We'd either bust blades or the flails. Then it became a manual thing with loppers and chain saws. If we created any new trails it was the same thing—a very time consuming effort."

With the aid of their tracked mulching machine, however, the process (not to mention the trails that are created) is a lot smoother and faster; probably five times faster or more, estimates Stouts.

In addition to walking and hiking trails, some parks are also developing snowmobile trails. Wisconsin forester Scott McDougal, who manages some tribal lands in northern Wisconsin, has experienced trail creation by hand and appreciates the time savings that mechanized mulching can provide. "We created a trail that was several miles long in 16 hours. It would have taken weeks to accomplish by hand."

Manpower Reduction

Time is not the only savings that mechanical mulchers offer for trail grooming. Typically mulchers are one-person operations, thus replacing a three- or four-person crew. Since a single person can now outwork a multi-person crew, productivity is greatly increased. At the same time, safety is enhanced



A Fecon FTX90 mulcher shreds underbrush and standing trees to six in. in diameter, making quick work of trail grooming projects.



A trail cut through fairly dense underbrush with a single pass of a mechanical mulcher.

because you can eliminate handling of sharp pruners, chainsaws, and other potentially dangerous items.

The shredded material creates a pathway that is both aesthetically pleasing and functional. A carpet of mulch is softer than bare dirt, provides better footing in wet weather, and is less messy in rainy conditions. Practically speaking, this mulch also prevents erosion, thus keeping trails from becoming rutted and potentially a risk for turned ankles or worse.

Mechanical mulchers can play an important role in trail grooming and creation. That is becoming increasingly important as Americans "hit the trails" to fulfill their New Year's resolutions. It is comforting to know that both park officials and park visitors can do so safely and comfortably. **GE**