

EQUIPPED WITH knowledge



A skid steer at the Gilford, New Hampshire, recycling center.

Photo courtesy of the Northeast Resource Association

Operating machinery at a transfer station requires efficiency, caution and knowledge of the end markets for which operators are preparing materials.

BY BOB GAETJENS

In addition to striking a balance between speed and safety, equipment operators at transfer stations need to understand how to sort materials to best prepare them for their respective end markets.

John Fay, programs and operations manager for the Windham Solid Waste Management District (WSWMD) transfer station, says he and his veteran operators train new employees at the small transfer station located in Brattleboro, Vermont. In most cases, he says, they don't have to start from scratch.

"The people that we've hired have been around machinery," he says. "They've [often] either grown up on a farm or have been a truck driver."

LEARNING THE MACHINES

The WSWMD transfer station operates two forklifts, a Gehl skid steer, two John Deere 410 backhoes and a John Deere 644 payloader, Fay says. When new employees come on board, Fay and veteran operators first orient them with the cab of each machine they'll operate.

Fay says tipping is a safety concern with forklifts. Operators need to understand how to treat loads of varying weights, how high they can safely lift specific weights and whether they can go down ramps forward or need to back down to avoid the risk of a load falling off the forks.

"You really have to know where your load is and what your machine is capable of, so we don't push the weight too far over the center of gravity," he says.

One of Fay's greatest challenges when it comes to forklift safety is convincing operators, who often need to adjust the load on the forklift, to conscientiously use their seatbelts, he says.

"They want to be efficient," Fay says. "They need to get in and out of the machine a lot."

Fay says he tries not to emphasize speed to the point that it trumps safety.

"If this job does not get done as efficiently as possible, that is OK," he says. "We know they're trying to do the best for the company and get things done efficiently, but it's more important that we all go home smiling at the end of the day."

The transfer station uses backhoes to compact materials in roll-off containers.

"We use the bucket part of the

backhoe to squish everything down," he says. "It takes a little bit of skill not to damage the roll-off but to move the trash around in there and push it down. And one of the roll-offs is under cover, so you have to watch the roof at the same time."

For operators new to using backhoes, Fay recommends getting them accustomed to the machine in less confined areas. "We have a composting field; [it's] all outdoors with open windrow composting," he says. "So, the few times we've had some new people here that hadn't run a backhoe before, we've sent them out into the compost field and told them to push stuff around and try smashing it and moving it."

Once operators are comfortable turning windrows and moving rocks and other objects in the yard, they can then advance to the roll-off containers.

Another task for backhoe operators at the WSWMD transfer station is loading compost into a screener.

"It's a big chute on the top," Fay says. "But if you go too far, the front of the [backhoe] could hit the bottom of the screen. While you're looking up high, you can hit something down low."

Fay says the payloader is the facility's largest machine, which can be intimidating at first for new operators. It's used primarily to work with compost, though, so there is not a great deal to damage. However, from time to time, he says trucks come into the field to dump materials, so checking the surrounding area before backing up is important, as it is on any piece of machinery.

'SPIRAL' TRAINING

For most new operators, Fay says it takes about a month to learn to run the equipment safely on their own.

"The old guard here has knowledge of



A horizontal baler at the Gilford Recycling Center in Gilford, New Hampshire.

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how to run equipment, what sort of pitfalls to look out for ... whereas I have the office skills of knowing what's required by our facility management plan, what's required by [the Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and what's required by state environmental regulations," he says.

Once operators are comfortable with the facility's operations, Fay says training enters what he calls a "spiral" phase where employees continue to learn what to do with specific materials they uncover in the waste stream.

"You can give them the list of what's acceptable and what's not and go over that, and then they'll work there for a while and come back and say, 'Hey, what about the clear lids on takeout containers? So, is that recyclable or not?'"

Operators will regularly ask detailed questions such as these for six months to a year, depending on the operator, Fay says.

FILLING TRAINING GAPS

While the Windham Transfer Station has a small crew compared with large urban and suburban facilities, its crew is larger than many rural transfer stations, Fay says.

"I think a lot of the town transfer stations have a single operator with a backup operator," he says. In many cases, this creates a training gap when it comes to learning how to separate material, he adds.

The Northeast Resource Recovery Association (NRRRA), Epsom, New Hampshire, provides training to help municipalities prepare materials for end markets, though its primary focus is to act as a broker between communities and end markets for recyclables.

"We act like a broker for the municipalities where we would tell them what to set aside, how to sort, how to bale material and where to market it," says Bonnie Bethune, NRRRA senior member services

representative. "We do extensive education as far as everything from a two-day annual conference that brings vendors and speakers in from all over the country, to talking about what our municipalities do, [to] an extensive website. We have monthly meetings. We had just one recently that had about 30 operators come in and talk about the challenges they're facing at their facilities."

Bethune says insurance companies also offer safety training. In other states, she says environmental services departments often can help rural operators and municipalities seeking training.

She adds that operators should have a plan for handling materials that don't belong at the transfer station and safety kits on hand. **wt**

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