

How Can We Do More With Our Existing Vegetation Management Budgets?

Utility vegetation management is more than just clearing vegetation from lines. To be effective, vegetation managers must be sure that budget dollars are allocated wisely, that varying conditions are taken into account, that crews are operating efficiently, and ultimately, that customers (and regulatory agencies) are satisfied.

So how do you make the most of your limited budget when there is only so much that can be done to make equipment and labor more productive? Trees keep growing, an aerial lift can only reach so far, so fast, and we all know how difficult it is to find qualified, productive tree workers.

The key to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of your vegetation management program is to invest in proven technology to gather information, streamline operations, reduce paperwork and effectively allocate your limited resources to maximum benefit.

The line construction side of the business has been doing this by using ruggedized PDAs, tablet computers and GPS devices along with specially-designed software to improve work planning for a decade or more. Some vegetation managers have adapted the technology to gather timesheet information or to inventory trees. There are a number of hardware and software vendors already in the market, ready to sell you something off-the-shelf or design something unique to your system. But many of these technologies are not designed for the unique needs of vegetation management programs.



**An example of a tablet computer
with work planning software**

(photo courtesy of Powel, Inc.)



**Electronic data collection streamlines
estimating, work scheduling and reporting**

Start Looking For Help Now

So, maybe you think that some of your processes aren't efficient enough, or your data is inadequate, but you don't know where to begin to fix these problems. There are plenty of ideas about how to improve operations, and examples of electronic solutions that work in other areas, but the solutions are not specific to the unique requirements of your vegetation management program.

The answer lies in finding a knowledgeable independent consultant who can help to pinpoint your problems, identify solutions and work with proven technology vendors to implement them. Truly effective programs require a great deal of coordination between utility staff and line clearance contractor management. Software alone cannot accomplish this task.

"My goal is to bring innovative ideas, as well as new tools and business processes, to help utilities and contractors improve their vegetation management programs," says Bob Richens, manager of ArborMetrics Solutions, Inc., one of several companies in North America that offer these services. He teams with leading utility industry technology providers like Powel, Inc. to address a variety of efficiency or software issues in utility vegetation management programs across the country. Companies like ArborMetrics also provide expert work planning personnel to improve the overall effectiveness of crew operations.

What Can Be Accomplished?

The following are examples of what a little innovative thinking and technology can achieve:

- Contractor and utility personnel in the field can electronically submit their hours, equipment and materials used, number of trees pruned or removed, etc., through ruggedized PDAs or tablet computers that transmit directly to a utility's SAP accounting system. This allows for better tracking of productivity and reduced paperwork, as well as more accurate billing and budgeting.

- Utilities can reduce the use of paper maps and customer notification documents by automating the inspection and permitting process. Work planners in the field can assess the work, get a property owner's signature for permission or refusal, and send this data electronically to a centralized work planning database. This makes it possible to better allocate the work and keep track of potential problems with customers.

- By using a utility's existing GIS (Geographical Information System) map layers, electronic data collection helps utilities and contractors avoid the tedious and expensive job of manually entering large amounts of data about vegetation and line conditions. This process can be used to streamline unit estimating or work planning and provides a more accurate means of reporting for compliance requirements.

- A utility can improve its response time to customer requests for trimming (a.k.a. trouble tickets) through an Internet-based customer call database. Instead of driving to an office to collect the tickets, a work planner ('ticket checker') downloads the trim request locations to a tablet computer, prioritizes them and conducts inspections to determine if work is required. Then the results are uploaded to a web-based reporting tool so that work tickets can be generated and scheduled more efficiently. This program saves on photocopying and fuel expenses, and frees up valuable utility and contractor supervisory time.



By combining proven technology and qualified personnel, ArborMetrics provides innovative solutions to your vegetation management problems.

For Every Vegetation Problem, There's ArborMetrics Solutions, Inc.

By choosing a consulting firm like ArborMetrics, utility vegetation managers can access proven technology and gain any necessary qualified personnel to streamline notification procedures, create more accurate workload forecasting, generate cost analyses by work type, crew, or circuit, and improve overall operational efficiency. These are reasons enough to take a long look right now at how you can do more with your existing vegetation management budget.