

KEEPING THE FLEET ROLLING

Scanner Magazine – May, 2011

The roar of a bucket truck's engine at two o'clock in the morning sets the tone for the line crew's preparations to repair an unexpected outage and restore power to homes across the state. The roar and full tank of gas are also gentle reminders that South Mississippi Electric's vehicle maintenance crew worked the evening before to refuel, clean and inspect the truck, preparing it for a call-out or the next work day.

"It means a lot to show up and be able to depend upon our trucks and equipment being ready to roll," said Bill Regan, line foreman. "It allows us to get to work and do our job without having to spend time making sure everything is fueled and in working order."

Arthur Ricketson, vehicle maintenance foreman, and his crew of six employees maintain SME's fleet of vehicles, often staying late to maintain or repair trucks or equipment upon being returned to the Field Operations Center (FOC) so that the fleet equipment is available for the next day's work.

The vehicle maintenance group has a combined 79 years of experience working on SME's fleet, which includes 92 gas-powered vehicles, 14 large trucks (one and one-half ton up to class eight) and 67 pieces of equipment (including trailers, loaders, forklifts, track equipment, digger derricks, cranes, and all-terrain vehicles).

While each member focuses on one particular area of responsibility within the group, they each have the skills to cross over and assist in other areas. Jody Dickinson, vehicle serviceman I, works alongside Greg Burge, hydraulic mechanic, to maintain the large trucks and equipment. Wayne Owens, vehicle serviceman I, performs general mechanical maintenance on all fleet vehicles. Maintenance laborers Ronnie Bradley and Brian Carter fuel and clean all fleet vehicles at Headquarters (Bradley) and the FOC (Carter). Part-time laborer Matthew Godshaw assists in scheduling preventive maintenance and tracking vehicle mileage and meters.

Maintaining the fleet according to the department's high standards begins with each refueling and cleaning. "Every time Ronnie or Brian refuels or cleans a car, they check the oil and antifreeze levels and inspect the tires," said Ricketson. "This helps us make sure the vehicle is up to par and allows the driver to do their work."

In addition, each fleet car is subjected to a more thorough inspection checklist every 180 days or 7,500 miles. The checklist includes brakes, tires, oil, air filters, seals, and wheel bearings. Routine maintenance is performed on a vehicle's belts and hoses every five years. "On occasion we may have to go service a car on the road that has had a problem, but our goal is to perform the preventive maintenance necessary to keep that from happening," said Ricketson.

A similar inspection schedule applies to the large trucks and equipment used by crews out in the field; however, the work performed by these on a regular basis requires a different method of tracking each vehicle's usage and additional testing and certification to maintain reliability and safety.

"Service schedules for specific types of vehicles and equipment are based on hours of usage when tracking mileage does not accurately tell us how much it actually worked that day," said Ricketson. "For example, the distance a bucket truck is driven to and from a job represents the miles driven, but fails to include the time between travel when the bucket is in operation."

Tracking the total hours it was in operation is important to keeping the general maintenance on schedule.” Hour meters aide the staff in tracking scheduled maintenance, which is performed every 200 hours of operation or 180 days.

“Every 180 days, we conduct a thorough bumper-to-bumper inspection on the large trucks and equipment,” said Burge. “This includes checking the torque on all of the bolts and the turntables, looking for any little problem that could lead to a big problem.”

The equipment is also inspected after every large job for signs of damage. “None of our lines is constructed on four-lane highways, so the terrain that the equipment is subjected to really takes a toll,” said Burge. “Most of the problems we find are the result of general wear and tear, such as blown hydraulic hoses, leaking cylinders, and electrical problems.”

The large trucks and equipment that work in close proximity to power lines— such as digger derricks, cranes, and bucket trucks—must also have an annual inspection through the manufacturer (Altec Industries or Terex Corporation). An additional certification, dielectric testing, performed through Diversified Inspections, tests for insulation and grounding properties to ensure safe operation.

Work such as the annual inspections and certifications cannot be completed by the SME group and is outsourced. Warranty work on new vehicles and work requiring resources not available through SME, such as windshield replacement or alignment, are sent to businesses specializing in that service.

Now, however, the shop is equipped with more resources and space than ever before. The vehicle maintenance group relocated to the Field Operations Center in 2008. The new shop boasts a 4,000-square-foot vehicle maintenance shop and a separate 6,000-square-foot truck and equipment shop, in addition to two offices, inventory supply rooms and outside wash bays. Several features were added at the new facility, including a service pit and overhead crane.

“The move to the FOC has allowed us to greatly increase our work space and add new equipment, which helps us better maintain the fleet,” said Ricketson. “It was important for our shop to grow to keep up with the growth of the fleet.”

“Our new shop is one of the finest in the South,” said Burge. “It gives us so much space to do our job and is so well-equipped.”

Since Ricketson started in the department 35 years ago, the department and its responsibilities have grown along with the rest of the Association. “When I started in 1976, one shop foreman and I were responsible for 27 vehicles,” said Ricketson. “SMEPA grew rapidly during that time, and within a year the fleet expanded to 45 vehicles; and we hired our first laborer to keep everything fueled and clean. Over the years, the biggest change has been the increase in fleet size and the bigger variety of equipment. As more cars and equipment have been added, we have had to grow to keep up.”

Regan agrees. “The work these guys do keeps us working,” he said. “We have more equipment than ever before that they have to maintain, and the quality of their work is obvious. It makes a big difference to have the equipment we need in the field and have it well maintained.”

“I think the biggest benefit to SMEPA for having an in-house vehicle maintenance group is that we see every vehicle when it leaves here and when it returns,” said Ricketson. “We do

everything we can to spot what can go wrong and keep it from happening. This allows the operator to depend on that vehicle or equipment and do their job without worrying and without having to take the time to service or fuel it themselves. They know their vehicle is always ready to go, even for call-outs during the night.”

“There are many unsung heroes within the organization that quietly work behind the scene to support equipment and fellow employees,” said Brad Wolfe, chief of transmission and support services. “Arthur and his group fall into this category. They work around everyone’s schedule to minimize downtime and to keep the fleet ready. I appreciate all that they do to serve this organization.”