

GYRO-TRAC NEWS

Brush-cutting device making rounds in county

March 24, 2005

Eileen Zaffiro, Daytona Beach News-Journal

ORMOND BEACH - After the last of three hurricanes tore through the state last year, toppled trees and mangled bushes were everywhere.

Some of the new piles of underbrush and broken branches were cleared away but, six months later, plenty of twisted debris remains on the ground. And it's more than an eyesore; it's a fire hazard.

Not a wildfire season too soon, Volusia County has a new tool to make that extra underbrush less of a threat. Last year, the county used grant money to purchase an \$85,000 brush cutter called a Gyro-Trac that mows through tough-to-cut underbrush that is the main fuel for wildfires.

The Gyro-Trac cuts a 6-foot swath through saw palmetto and other stubborn vegetation and the mulch that is left behind is a much lower fire risk than the underbrush, said Ormond Beach Fire Department Capt. John Carey.

The Gyro-Trac is available to any government throughout the county, and this month Ormond Beach is taking its first turn with the heavy duty mower.

"It's in constant demand," Carey said. "It removes fuel so you don't get a raging fire, and it creates access if there is a fire. It will cut up limbs from downed trees and it mows all around the dead stuff."

The mower also can be used to prepare an area for a controlled burn, Carey said.

Last week, the Gyro-Trac was used to mow about 35 acres of underbrush west of the Northbrook neighborhood, which is near Ormond Beach Middle School.

Deltona got the machine next, but Ormond Beach firefighters plan to use it in the Northbrook area again in about two weeks to cut an additional 30-40 acres, Carey said.

After that, the city will use the machine in the Ormond Beach Airport Business Park.

The main advantage of the machine is that it can be used near neighborhoods where it would not be safe to conduct controlled burns, he said.

Firefighters try to preserve a natural greenbelt with a little flora near homes, and they notify homeowners and private businesses before they begin cutting.

But firefighters ultimately don't need private landowners' permission to mow, and can use the brush cutter wherever they see a hazard, Carey said.

Another advantage of the Gyro-Trac is that it costs cities nothing to use, he said. Only county firefighters are trained to use the machine, so cities invest only the time it takes to identify a troubled area.

Controlled burns, on the other hand, tie up six to eight firefighters for about eight hours, Carey said.

"The only problem with the machine is that it requires quite a bit of maintenance," he said. "This cuts roots. It's a tough machine. Because it goes through such rough terrain, you have to keep the blades sharp."

Most fire departments can't come up with \$85,000 to buy their own brushcutter, he said, so the machine promises to continue making the rounds in Volusia County.

Other than the increase in underbrush produced by the hurricanes, the area is not under high-risk wildfire conditions so far this year, Carey said.

"We have had some windy days, but the rain patterns have been better the past few years and there haven't been any hard freezes to dry out the fuel," he said.