



Courtesy Photos

Older combines stand at the ready at Alan Shaff Farms near Hillsboro, Ore. They are proof that well-maintained equipment can enjoy a long, productive life.

## Tractors, combines must be ready when it's 'go time'

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**  
For the Capital Press

Farmers in the Midwest chuckle at their Western counterparts, asking how a machine used less than a month out of the year gets worn down so quickly.

While tractors normally have a lengthy work season, in Oregon's Willamette Valley most combines will run two, maybe three weeks out of the year.

"Our harvest window is

generally pretty short," said Eric Stritzke, general manager of Linn Benton Tractor in Silverton, Ore. "That machine being parked, even in a building, is harder on all the seals, hoses and everything than if it were being used."

The narrow harvest window and its variables mean a breakdown can be critical.

"They use them hard and any time you have downtime it is extremely expensive in the grand scheme of things," Stritzke said. "In this day and age labor for absolutely any operation is a huge expense so if you have a combine or a tractor down you may have an operator down, a truck driver that's not being productive and it's just a vicious cycle. Also, any of the modern farm equipment can get pretty deadly pretty quickly if it's not operating right or is not operated in a correct manner.

"When I was turning wrenches I was always looking for what might fail," he said. "Downtime you lose money but safety you lose lives."

While the workings of a combine can seem overwhelmingly complicated, boiled down to basics they're pretty straightforward machines.

"There are a lot of great mechanics out there but very few have been taught the basic functions of how one part interacts with another," Stritzke said. "You can't typically take a truck mechanic and throw him at a combine or tractor and vice versa."

The rapid advances in technology over the past 30



Brothers Cole and Spencer Stritzke explore the ins and outs of large machinery at Linn Benton Tractor in Silverton, Ore. To fill the increasing need for mechanics and technicians for modern machinery, their father Eric, general manager, says it is necessary to reach out to the younger generation with encouragement and education.

to 40 years is putting a monkey wrench into maintenance and repair.

"With the newest combines and tractors, you've got all the computerized electronics in addition to all the belts, chains, bearings and sheet metal and it takes much more of a technician to understand how those electronics work with the base machine," he said. "You can shut down a \$200,000 combine because of a \$2 sensor."

Electronic capabilities have created new gaps in the industry and a shortage of people to fill them. For instance, if a tractor operator rides the clutch for a certain period of time, in some cases

the dealership gets an email informing them of the issue. They in turn are expected by the manufacturer to notify the customers.

The high-tech machines also spell opportunity for the next generation of mechanics.

"We need to start looking at our middle school and high school teenagers and grooming them to fill these gaps; providing them the college educations," Stritzke said. "As we all know it's tougher and tougher to find people that want to do physical labor and modern young technicians are a rare commodity because not only do they have the physical side of it but they also need to be a computer technician.

"There are a number of ag mechanic programs throughout the country but it's getting tougher and tougher to find individuals that are interested in those programs," he added. "That's where we need to be engaging ourselves."

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