

Lab tests tractors, exposes students to farm industry

At East Campus' unique testing track, employees work as a team to examine the machinery.

By ERIN GIBSON
Staff Reporter

From across the nation and around the world, tractors are coming to UNL's East Campus.

The brightly painted steel giants roll in from Michigan, Arizona and as far away as Russia.

Louis Leviticus, professor of biological systems engineering, said manufacturers pay big bucks to bring their tractors to his Tractor Test Lab on East Campus.

Since 1920, a Nebraska consumer protection law has mandated that all tractors sold for agricultural use in the state must pass a rigorous set of tests.

The tests are only offered at the East Campus lab, the only testing track of its kind in the United States and the first to develop standardized tractor testing.

Six students and four staff members conduct the weeklong tests, worth \$20,000 each, he said. The revenue generated from the 20 yearly tests pays the lab's annual operating costs, including employee salaries, and doesn't leave a hefty price tag with the university.

But there is no price tag on the lab's benefit to University of Nebraska-Lincoln students, he said. After graduation, 98 percent of lab workers get jobs with tractor companies.

"Everybody who works here at the lab is exposed to many people in the industry," Leviticus said. "Even people who do not have a very good grade average get jobs."

But Leviticus said he has high standards for employees. He looks for stu-

dents with a work ethic he can trust, mainly students with farm backgrounds.

"They go home when the work is done," Leviticus said, "not like city kids."

"City kids would take off at five and leave everything half-finished."

Keith Kennedy, a mechanized systems management senior, said lab workers must expect to stay overtime to complete testing for companies, he said.

Kennedy said the late work at the lab is worth it because of connections made with industry leaders. A job at the lab also is a good resume builder, he said.

"It really gives me an edge over a lot of other majors without the work experience," Kennedy said.

Tests conducted at the lab include a check for compliance with emissions standards and measuring the power of a tractor's takeoff, the horsepower of its engine and the weight a tractor can tow and lift.

Leviticus said corporations spent a lot of money on the tests, and some bring in four \$150,000 tractors at a time.

"We have to give them value for their money," he said.

Kennedy said when company engineers arrive, they expect nothing less than absolute efficiency and precision.

"We have to be on our feet when they walk in the door," he said.

Company engineers spend weeks in Lincoln to keep an eye on their tractors and on the testing. But engineers in town this week from the AgCo Corp. say they see little chance of a testing disaster.

Robert Becker, AgCo field test consultant, worked as a student at the UNL lab more than 40 years ago. He and James Rauwerdink, manager of tractor tests, said students and lab engineers are very capable.

"Generally, they're just farm kids, and they're top notch," Becker said.

To keep the companies happy,

Leviticus said the students must work together to handle the large scale of testing and to fix problems when they come up.

"Invariably something goes wrong," he said. "Something breaks or something leaks."

Leviticus said cold weather halts the testing process because the tractors' rubber components harden during extreme cold, and this throws off test results.

But during the warm months, the lab will see several kinds of tractors, he said.

"We're kind of like prostitutes," Leviticus said. "We do anything which we can get money for in the engineering area."

For example, he said, the lab once tested a Sno-Cat tractor built for polar ice-core drilling. Another time, a sea of little lawn-mowing tractors filled the laboratory floor.

But now, the Legislature may eliminate the almost 70-year-old law that

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LOUIS LEVITICUS
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brings such tractors to the lab.

If that happens, companies would no longer be required to have their tractors tested at the lab before selling them in Nebraska.

Becker said this would benefit Nebraska dealers. Rauwerdink said companies, including AgCo, must withhold some tractor models from the Nebraska market because of test costs, which can limit the selection offered to dealers.

But Becker, who has been in Lincoln for testing since Sept. 28, said

companies will continue to bring their tractors to East Campus even if the testing law is repealed, because the Nebraska lab tests are valuable credentials for a tractor.

Many U.S. tractor manufacturers also sell their tractors in Europe — which requires certain standardized tests — and the Nebraska tests are internationally recognized, he said.

Therefore, the tractor testing lab should remain busy, Becker said, making sure the steel giants keep humming.

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