

Looking for greater output and efficiency, while maintaining low ground pressure characteristics, one Suffolk contractor has added a five-wheel Ploeger self-propelled spreader to its machinery fleet. **Geoff Ashcroft** reports.

Ploeger reveals 'game-changing' spreader

As muck spreaders go, the Ploeger AT5105 with Tebbe body has its five wheels firmly planted in the big league.

It is a design reminiscent of the Terra Gator Big A's that dominated the lime spreading scene of the 1980s. Yet this modern take on what some might consider a classic spreading rig is now considered to incorporate all the things Big A operators ever wanted, with few of the drawbacks. Innovations found on this

£500,000 machine include continuously variable transmission, fuel-efficient Scania 550hp engine, GPS field recording, automatic rate control, all-wheel steering and all-wheel drive.

Shod on 1050 flotation tyres, it combines low ground pressure characteristics with a 24-metre spread pattern, suiting applications via tramlines and controlled traffic regimes.

For Suffolk-based O.J. Neil Contracting, the Ploeger AT5105 is viewed as a game-changer. It is

the firm's first five-wheeler, and it sits alongside a fleet of six Vredo VT4556 self-propelled models that are used to apply biosolids as part of a 350,000-tonne contract spreading operation for Thames Water.

Tom Clarkson, biorecycling and transport manager for O.J. Neil Contracting says: "We are always under pressure from farmers waiting to get biosolids spread on their land as soon as the combine has gone through.

"And while we have good capacity from our existing fleet of Vredo spreaders, we have also implemented changes to our working hours at peak times, to improve the health and well-being of our operators," he says. "And that includes building in rest periods and days-off during our busiest times from July to September."

Performance

Mr Clarkson says that to implement these changes, spreader performance and productivity needed to be reviewed, so the business could keep on top of its extensive summer workload.

"We soon realised that it was going to take an extra spreader to achieve the same output in fewer hours," he adds.

"So we looked at buying additional capacity, to run with our 20t capacity Vredos."

Mr Clarkson says that the Ploeger AT5105 stood out from the crowd. Its 27t payload, additional 100hp over the Vredo VT4556's and five-wheel stance put it at the top of his wishlist. And having just completed its first season with O.J. Neil Contracting, Mr Clarkson is upbeat about the Ploeger's performance.

"The Ploeger has applied 75,000t through the summer, and our next nearest Vredo has spread 49,000t," he says.

"It has been mind-blowing."

While he adds that there are many variables that impact on performance, he says that such an improvement has triggered an overhaul of how and where the spreading fleet operates.

"We are always looking for efficiency gains that are both affordable and practical," he says.

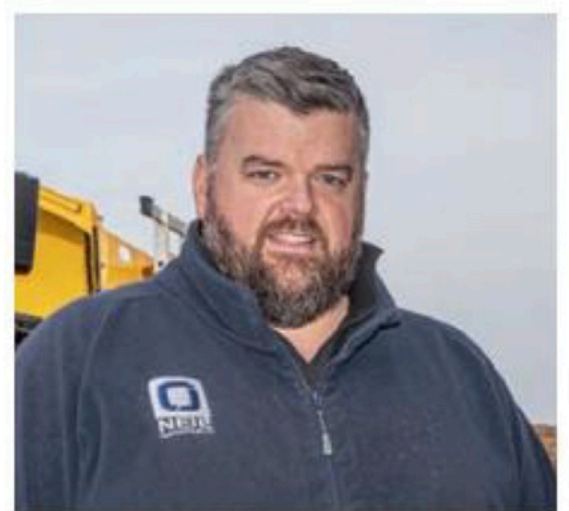
"The Vredo spreaders are impressive, and achieve 850t/day but are capable of 1,000t, while the Ploeger does 1,000t effortlessly and is capable of 1,400-1,500t/day."

"A 25 per cent improvement is far in excess of what we expected," he Mr Clarkson.

"Though credit goes to our operator Tommy Duff, who has taken the time to find out how to get the best from the spreader and its four application modes."



The Ploeger AT5105 is the latest low-impact self-propelled spreader to join O.J. Neil Contracting's extensive fleet.



“The Ploeger does 1,000 tonnes effortlessly and is capable of 1,400-1,500t/day

TOM CLARKSON

Spreading teams have access to job sites through in-cab tablet devices, which Mr Clarkson can remotely populate with jobs. It has allowed daily checks and machine walk-arounds to be included, along with pre-start check lists and site-specific risks to

be carried out, ensuring each job is carried out safely and efficiently.

"Every farm location has to be signed-off and sync'd back to the office on completion, before a new job can be uploaded and commenced," Mr Clarkson adds. "Importantly, this also

triggers invoicing for the work that has been completed."

Spreading teams have been going out with either a wheeled loader or excavator, with low-loader moves taking care of the excavators.

The Ploeger, however, is equipped

with a Rockinger hitch and a commercial-spec tri-axle balance trailer, allowing it to haul a 13t excavator with it. "This brings more efficiencies to the team," says Mr Clarkson.

"It no longer relies on using another tractor and low loader to

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help with machinery moves. With the excavator correctly loaded and chained down, the Ploeger team can move quickly and easily between farms."

An excavator is favoured for its ability to work cleanly when loading. Though bucket capacity – and perhaps excavator size – is up for review.

"It takes between 2-2.5 minutes to load a Vredo using an excavator; the Ploeger's bigger body takes 3.5 minutes to fill," says Mr Clarkson.

"Each bucket is about 1.5t, so it is a lot more passes to fill the Ploeger, and that means we are losing time. It is such a weapon, that we now need to find a better combination of loader speed and size, which reduces the fill-time."

Mr Clarkson has been fortunate enough to spend some time in the cab of the Ploeger AT5105, as relief operator. And he rates almost every aspect of its performance and comfort.

"The cab sits on air suspension; its traction, manoeuvrability and ability to change the power delivery to the front wheel makes this a superb spreader," he says.

"But there are some aspects that are disappointing. The joystick control still has forager graphics on its buttons, rather than bespoke control



In-cab controls include a touch-screen terminal and multi-function joystick.

icons for the spreader. And you are sat on top of the engine, so the cab is noisier than it really should be for a machine of this calibre – though we are told some additional sound-proofing material is going to be applied to the cab."

Vibrated

He says that in-use, the cooling pack guard has vibrated open on its gas struts, with his workshop team creating a quick fix, and the exhaust pipe faces the body and has already started to blacken the paintwork.

"It just needs a little attention

to detail applying to it," he adds. "But overall, we are pleased with what it brings to the business and Ploeger is easy to deal with."

Mr Clarkson says that for all the Ploeger's ability, there will always be a need for both self-propelled spreader types in the fleet, but the higher efficiency could lead to using fewer machines.

"The Vredos offer crab steering, and are better suited to sloping ground and more delicate field conditions, while the Ploeger is more at home among wide-open spaces and big fields," adds Mr Clarkson.

Spreader specifications

- **Model:** AT5105
- **Chassis:** Five-wheel, with all-wheel drive
- **Engine:** 13-litre Scania, 550hp
- **Transmission:** ZF Ecom 5.0 CVT 0-40kph
- **Payload:** 27 tonnes

"But do not let its size blind your imagination when it comes to manoeuvrability. All five wheels are steered – it turns tightly, and without causing surface damage."

"In addition, the front wheel does overlap the footprint of the two rear axles, so there is a full spread of weight across the width of the machine."

He says that having restructured how the spreading teams operate has also brought many additional benefits to the business.

"While operators get much-needed time off to avoid fatigue or burn-out, we have also introduced planned maintenance schedules on those days that equipment is parked up," he says.

"This means we can catch those fast-wearing items such as bearings or shafts on spreaders long before they fail, which is also creating a reduction in downtime."

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