

Tree work takes to the air

By Ruth E. Thaler-Carter, Freelance Writer

Talk about a creative new approach – **Eric Bray**, Division Manager of Lewis Tree Service’s **Central Region**, uses a helicopter to clear rights-of-way near power lines.

“We’re doing this work for Duke Energy operations in all states where we have contracts with that company,” said Bray. “We’ve used the helicopter in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana.”

The helicopter work is a new service for the Central division and is “part of our efforts to reduce costs and increase productivity,” Bray said.

Bray subcontracts the copter for now, but is training to be a pilot, in part so he can handle a copter for the company in the future. He has already bought his own Cessna airplane and is a certified student pilot. “I got interested in flying because my uncle has a local town airport for small airplanes,” he recalled.

The Central division uses helicopters for work affecting 345,000-volt electrical transmission lines – trimming or removing trees in rights-of-way or nearby that could bring down the lines. “The lines send power across the country to substations, which reduce voltage and send the power into homes,” said Bray. “Working on or around them is dangerous work. Part of what we’re doing is protecting the national (power) grid.”

Why do this work from the air? In a word: productivity. “The helicopter has a two-person crew – a pilot and a groundsperson – versus the traditional ground crew of six to 30 guys,” Bray said. “We can trim two to 20 miles a day with the copter, compared to 100 to 600 feet a day with a ground crew.” There are cost differences, but “we can come out ahead if it’s managed properly; ‘planned and managed’ is the key.”

The work is done with a saw attached to the bottom of the copter. The saw

comes in different lengths, from 12 to 30 feet, depending on the job. “We assess the job to decide which saw to use,” said Bray. The saw is controlled by a gas-powered motor mounted with the saw, with a remote control in the copter. It can be angled up to 360 degrees and its speed can be controlled as well.

The actual work is done by the contractor, but the main driver at Lewis is **Johnny Richards**, Transmission Project manager. He oversees a crew doing the work on the ground to clean up windrow and brush, fix fences and carry out whatever other repairs or clean-up tasks are needed. “We use GPS to clean up and follow through,” said Bray.

The contractor Bray uses has eight helicopters available 52 weeks a year all over the country. The helicopter can be used year-round, weather permitting – “wind is the enemy,” followed by rain and visibility. The other main limitation is that the approach will not work on busy roads or interstate highways because of rubberneckers. “You can’t shut down a highway to do this kind of work, and it attracts too much attention from the public to do it in congested areas,” said Bray.



Contractor is primed for trimming by helicopter.

Looking to the future, Bray would like to own his own copter and do his own flying, as well as assign more work to this technique. “I’ve always been fascinated with this,” he said. “I can see more areas where we can use it. We can do distribution and transmission wires; there are many potential customers and uses, such as pipeline work. I knew it was out there and could save the company a lot of money, and I think I was right.”

Backing up Bray’s instincts have been Regional Vice President **Mike Andersen**, who has “supported this idea from start to finish,” and Duke representatives Billy George and Eric Sampson in customer relations and Gary Williams, director, whose support “has been tremendous in making this happen.”

In short, trimming trees along power-line rights-of-way by helicopter is an exciting new venture for the company. “I’m proud to be part of this, because it puts Lewis on the cutting edge of technology and productivity,” said Bray.



Helicopter is ready to take saw array to the air.