

SELF-PROPELLED VS. PULL-BEHIND SPRAYER OWNERSHIP



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– Tony Brown, Lovington, Illinois

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

The Case For Self-Propelled Sprayers

On many row crop and small grain farms, pull-behind sprayers have long been the standard for farmers who take care of their own herbicide and pesticide applications. While they’ve historically held a cost benefit over alternatives, like owning a self-propelled sprayer or relying on a custom applicator, those benefits are marginalizing as farms scale up in size and demand grows for season-long capabilities that owning a self-propelled sprayer can provide.

Crop market prices have tight margins for many grain farmers today, causing apprehension among farmers considering a big-ticket purchase like a new self-propelled sprayer. But, the cost of owning a self-propelled sprayer is more than justifiable versus the cost of either buying new or maintaining an existing pull-behind sprayer, especially when accounting for the overall management implications the latter type of sprayer has for owners and operators.

Cost and Management Factors

Although self-propelled sprayers carry slightly higher initial price tags, application costs contribute to the higher ROI of a self-propelled machine. Depending on the acres covered, self-propelled sprayers can accomplish the same job as pull-type machines for around the same or lower cost; the more acres covered, the more cost-efficient a self-propelled sprayer becomes.

“Some will say that cost-wise, self-propelled sprayers are too expensive. But, when you add up all the associated costs of operating and maintaining a pull-behind sprayer today, especially if you have to supplement it with custom applications, self-propelled sprayers make a lot more sense,” says Equipment Technologies East Regional Director Chris Jones. “There are different aspects of the cost equation to look at with pull-type and self-propelled sprayers.”

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Though the purchase price of the sprayer itself is higher for the self-propelled machine, the basic equation doesn't account for the cost of the increased time and other resources a pull-behind sprayer typically takes to do the same job as a self-propelled machine.

"Compared to my old pull-behind, my Apache has such big booms and you can spray at higher speeds with so much accuracy. It's amazing how much you can get done," says Lovington, Illinois, farmer Tony Brown. "That's especially true in the spring time when planting is the most critical thing to get done. It seems like you're always having to plant soybeans and spray corn at the same time. With this machine, I can spray a couple hundred acres quickly and get back to planting."

The difference is even more poignant with the increased size and options when it comes to self-propelled sprayers, adds Westfield, Indiana, farmer Brad Roberts.

"We used to have a 500-gallon pull-type sprayer with booms, but it got to the point where we didn't have a tractor to pull it with. That led us to buy a self-propelled sprayer. We've been ecstatic with the Apache. It's a great machine," he says. "With the pull-type it used to take us a week or more to spray all of our corn and bean acres."

The Custom Application Necessity With Pull-Behind Sprayers

Sprayer ownership and application management is not a set of mutually exclusive options. In fact, many farmers who own and operate their own machine often still rely on custom applicators, adding to the overall cost of applications. It's more common when owning a pull-behind sprayer, Jones says.

"I think most people have some sort of sprayer and are still supplementing it with a custom application. If you have a pull-behind sprayer, but you have to make a late-season application when the corn crop is taller, you risk damaging the crop," he says. "It's not cost-effective if you don't have a tall enough sprayer and might do more damage to the crop than what you'll gain in the application. If you have a 50-inch Apache Sprayer, for example, you will have more clearance."

For farmers and farm managers, like Ronnie Russell of Water View, Virginia, the ability to avoid using a tractor is a big reason he made the switch to an Apache AS720. Prior to the switch, Russell relied exclusively on pull-behind sprayers and custom applicators.

"This machine is designed specifically for spraying, and with what these tractors cost these days, pulling that pull-behind rig with one adds a lot of cost," says Russell, who manages a farm of around 2,000 acres. "You can spray for a couple dollars per acre, whereas it would cost me \$7 or \$8 if I hired it out."

The Sprayer Marketplace's Influence

Beyond the long-term cost benefits of a self-propelled sprayer versus a pull-behind machine, the current marketplace for both machines is another factor that makes the former type a better investment in the long run. Today's self-propelled machines retain their value better than pull-behind sprayers, mainly because of demand. Simply, there's more general demand for self-propelled sprayers, and that's evident by values in the used sprayer market.

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“The used market is stronger than a couple of years ago, but lower commodity prices mean a lot of farmers aren’t making as much money, so they don’t want to spend a lot. At the same time, there’s a ton of used inventory on the market and a lot of good deals,” Jones says. “Self-propelled sprayers hold their value better, and you’re going to get a good portion of your money back when you go to trade one in. Dealers will take a pull-behind on trade, but not for as much as the farmer will want for it.”

On the new side of the market, prices for all machines – including pull-behind sprayers – continue to rise. Between the cost of operation and typical resale value, self-propelled sprayers wind up being the best financial choice in the long run, Jones says.

“Farmers are looking at cash flow a lot more today. They don’t necessarily care what color the machine is as much as they used to,” he says. “They’re looking at cost per acre, ROI and cash flow, and if they can justify a self-propelled sprayer purchase – whether through a lease or outright purchase – they are buying. They want machines that do the job, don’t cause headaches and always run.”

Let’s review:

1. Self-propelled sprayers are growing in utility as farms grow and diversify, especially when compared to pull-behind sprayers.
2. Though they have higher initial price tags, self-propelled sprayers have a higher return-on-investment in the long run because of variables like application timing and overall operational efficiency.
3. Owning and operating a self-propelled sprayer can replace much of the work otherwise done by a custom applicator, a greater necessity with pull-behind sprayers.
4. Self-propelled sprayers retain their value better than pull-behind sprayers because of stronger demand for both new and used models.



Apache Sprayers provide unsurpassed value, retailing for as much as \$120,000 LESS than other self-propelled sprayers. Plus, they retain an average of 72 percent of their value after five years – which is why *EquipmentWatch*TM recognized Apache as the “Highest Retained Value” in 2016, 2017 and 2018.

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