THE MEN OF HUMBUG STATION FIGHT BACK

Their Chance Of Victory Seems Nil

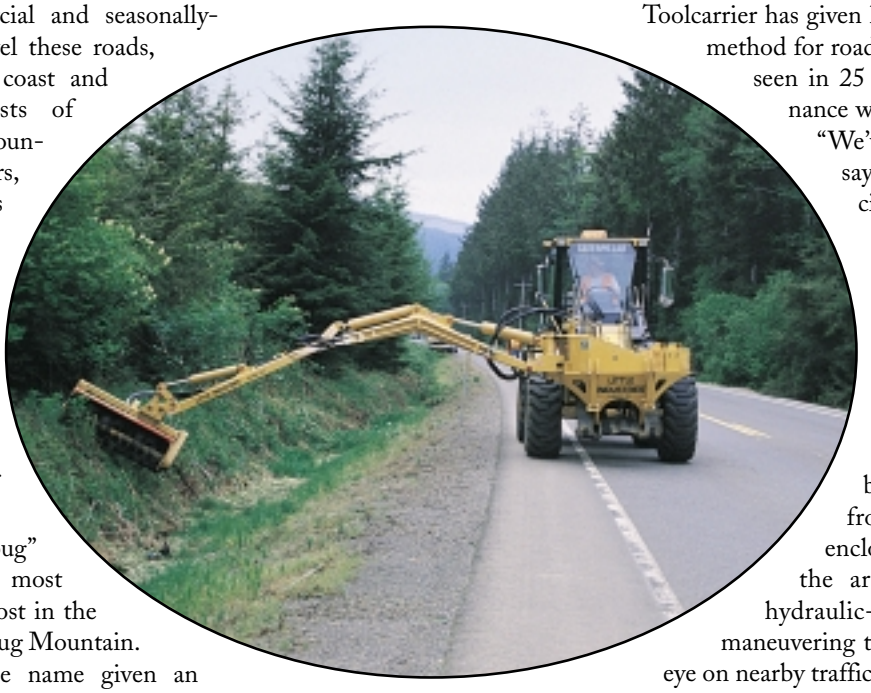
There they are, a crew of nine quiet men on a forbidding coastline, facing off against some of nature's most formidable power: 100-mile-per-hour winds, months of torrential icy rain and snow, mud and rock slides and culvert washouts. Their task is to keep open, and safe, 75 miles of twisting two-lane road that nature is determined to close – a segment of Oregon's only coastal artery – Oregon Coast Highway (US 101) – and a portion of connecting US 26.

Log trucks, commercial and seasonally-heavy tourist traffic travel these roads, which wind along the coast and through the fir forests of Oregon's steep coastal mountain range. For 150 years, logging these forests has drawn hardy outdoorsmen like those nine who are counter-punching Mother Nature. What a surprise to learn that this stalwart group is marshaled under the unlikely banner of Humbug Station.

How the word "humbug" found a home in this most unpretentious region is lost in the solitude of nearby Humbug Mountain. Humbug Section is the name given an Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) highway maintenance area. Measured in highway miles, Humbug's maintenance responsibility is the smallest of any of Oregon's maintenance sections. That is because, mile-for-mile, the maintenance demands of this section are the state's most daunting.

"It's war," reports Nells Osterholme, section group coordinator at Humbug Station. "Year-round we're fighting Mother Nature. During the winter we've had as much as 140 inches of rain on the coast range, and in one 36-hour period 23 inches of snow. Now it's spring and all that water and rich soil and warm sun make for another set of problems. You can almost see that foliage grow."

Osterholme nodded toward a roadside bank on US 26 near its junction with US 101. It was a waste-deep jungle with alder saplings poking through a verdant mat of wild berries. A hundred yards down the road and heading our way was the newest addition to Humbug Station's maintenance arsenal: a hydraulic-powered weed cutter on the front of a Caterpillar IT14G Integrated Toolcarrier. Its flail cutter-head was reducing the heavy thicket to a four-foot swath of mulch. Periodically the articulated boom moved the flail high up the bank to trim growth hanging over the highway.



According to Osterholme, the combination of a Little Industries brush cutter and Caterpillar's Integrated Toolcarrier has given his crew the most effective method for roadside foliage control he has seen in 25 years of highway maintenance work.

"We've tried everything," he says, "chain saws, axes, herbicide sprays, machetes, sickle bars on farm tractors – even a rotary mower mounted on the side of a motor grader. The IT14G works great."

The Cat Integrated Toolcarrier/brush cutter combination is controlled by a single operator who, from the security of an enclosed elevated cab, oversees the articulating boom and its hydraulic-powered flail while maneuvering the IT14G and keeping an eye on nearby traffic. As the machine moves he positions the cutter head to cut anywhere from the roadside shoulder to beyond and below guardrails and high up roadside banks.

A single diesel engine powers the hydraulic pumps and the IT14G's hydrostatic drive, whose unique feature is the ability to move the machine through a seamless range of travel speeds at a constant engine speed. There is no clutch to slip or gears to shift, no need to ride the brakes and no drop-off of hydraulic power when travel is slowed. With the throttle set at optimum rpm the operator uses an "inching" function of the hydrostatic drive to move the IT14G as fast or slow as brush cutting conditions demand.

The four-foot-wide flail cuts roadside grass and low weeds at up to 5 miles per hour. And though it can cut through six-inch branches, Osterholme's crew prefers using chain saws to cut the few saplings larger than two inches.

While ODOT group coordinator Nells Osterholme looks on, one of the nine men of Humbug Station, Tony Wiseman, tightens the knives of the Cat IT14G flail cutter head.

Though roadside appearance is important to ODOT, cutting down roadside vegetation has more to do with safety for the traveling public and eliminating highway closures than with aesthetics. Lengthening sight lines for motorists on winding roads and providing them with a good view of the roadside are the goals. "For vehicles to pass safely on these narrow roads drivers need to see a long way ahead," he says. "And, they also must be on the look-out for elk and deer near the road."

Cutting back this vegetation is also important to highway maintenance. "By controlling the growth in drainage areas we help eliminate highway flooding during storms," explains Osterholme. Because the IT14G quick-connects to many tools in addition to the Little Industries brush cutter – several material buckets, a pickup sweeper, a picking arm, even a propane-powered asphalt paving screed – the Caterpillar machine is thrown into a wide range of Humbug Station's skirmishes with nature. But though this adaptable machine is helping ODOT do a better job of recovering from nature's blows, the men of Humbug Station can't relax.

"Those big storms will be back next winter," warns Osterholme.

And so will the nine men of Humbug Station. ❖

The weight and stability of the Cat IT14G and the elevated operator's cab contribute to high volume brush cutting where roadside vegetation is a particular problem near Oregon's Pacific coast.