

Backhoe Technology – Old and New – Helps Southern Pipeline Tackle Gas and Water Pipe Utility Work in Louisville

Oil, gas and water contractor successfully uses compact excavators, track loaders and backhoe loaders in a heavy-duty environment.

By Katie Pullen, brand marketing manager, CASE Construction Equipment

David Spencer, CEO of Southern Pipeline in Louisville, is no stranger to the demands of the oil and gas industry. Hired as an operator in 1981, then becoming a foreman and working his way through the ranks of the company, Spencer has just about seen it all.

He's come to believe that bigger machines don't always equal bigger production. Southern Pipeline has a history of using [backhoe loaders](#) and compact equipment to effectively complete jobs and stay on top of the competition. With their size, maneuverability, and minimal disruption to existing landscapes, these compact machines prove that they can get the job done without sacrificing power.

A True Fit

The company's scope revolves around pipe utility work, primarily working with customers in the Louisville area. But because they're not just an excavation and installation company, handling everything from ductwork and pipe bursting, to slip lining and directional boring, Southern Pipeline requires a versatile lineup of equipment.

Southern Pipeline has around 35 CASE backhoes in their lineup, which they use for both distribution and transmission work. In the beginning, the company only purchased two-wheel drive backhoes, but they've recently transitioned to four-wheel drive models.

"Let's say a truck comes up and dumps a load of gravel and you have to push that gravel in the ditch," Spencer says. "Before, with the two-wheel drive, you'd have to get the bucket and put it in the ditch because you didn't have the pushing power or traction. With the four-wheel drives, you can walk through a load of gravel cutting it back into a ditch line. It makes all the difference in the world as far as strength of the machine."

A component of the CASE backhoes that Spencer deems important is the three-stick control system. While some equipment owners see this as a throwback, Spencer sees it as an important feature for the terrain that he and his operators work in.

"With the three-stick hoe, I can set my hand on the three sticks, boom out, roll the bucket, boom up, boom in with my hand, and get a hold of the steering wheel behind me or the front bucket," he says. "I think everyone should have to learn how to operate a three-stick. If they ever operated a three-stick... for use under any condition, they would stick with it."

According to Spencer, the company is transitioning from their CASE 590 (15-foot) class of backhoe loaders to the CASE 580 (14-foot) class due to the more compact footprint (to take up less space) and the ability to more easily work in and navigate tight working quarters (particularly, roadsides).

“You have to have more space to get into [the 590],” Spencer says. “I’ve always liked backfilling with the 580 because it was smaller. A lot of our work is done right off the side of the road. We lay the spoil up on the road, take the lane of traffic, lay the pipe and then we’ve got to backfill the spoil back into the ditch. The 590 was a bigger machine to get squared up to push the spoil back in.”

In that size class, Spencer recently added two new [CASE 580 Super N](#) backhoe loaders. The machine came with the extend-a-hoe option, and Spencer wanted to see if it could compete with the 590 size class when laying pipe.

“So far, we’re tickled to death with it,” he says. “The operator loves it.”

The N series offers a Tier 4 Interim 3.4-liter turbocharged Cooled Exhaust Gas Recirculation (CEGR) engine that delivers standout performance, a faster throttle response and fuel savings of 5 – 20 percent. According to Spencer, it’s also a quieter machine.

“I came up through the ranks over the years and have listened to a backhoe blare behind my head,” he says. “It amazes me how quiet these machines are. It just astonishes me how quiet it sounds running.”

The 580 Super N features a push-button PowerLift feature, which increases operator productivity with increased breakout forces and lifting capacity of over 3,500 pounds with the boom retracted. Spencer predicts that the PowerLift feature will be a huge addition to his company.

“We’ve got a job going now that I had 20-foot steel plates built for road crossings. It’s 1-inch thick steel plate. They’re 6-feet wide and 20-feet long,” he says. “They said the 580 that we just bought with the PowerLift on it would pick a plate up and sit it on there. It’s got strength.”

Compact Size, Big Impact

Southern Pipeline also uses a wide range of compact equipment due to the minimal amount of impact they have on the sites they’re working on.

The company has a couple [CX55B compact excavators](#) and a [CX36B compact excavator](#), which Spencer believes to be the next big thing for his company due to their size and visibility.

“If there's not enough room to get the truck beside you to load the truck, with that zero turn, you can dig, swing around and load the truck behind you,” Spencer says. “It being compact and easy to maneuver in bad spots is playing big in the company right now.”

He continues, “We’re turning more and more to small excavators. To me, the big factor on anything is the visibility you have as an operator. It’s how well you can see the area that you’re disturbing.”

The company also has a [CASE TV380 compact track loader](#). According to Spencer, it’s a popular machine with his operators, “When we bought the CASE, with it’s visibility and the power the machine’s got, everybody wants to be on the CASE.”

The compact track loader was designed with a lower threshold and higher head clearance for easy entry and exit from the machine. The lower threshold also improves visibility down to the bucket and the attachment, which is something Spencer credits as the most operator-friendly feature on the machine.

“When you're cleaning up in somebody's yard and you need to cut a little dirt off to get it back to grade, if you can see the front cutting edge of that bucket, it makes all the difference in the world,” Spencer says.

The machine is also credited with part of the company’s success due to its ability to not impact existing landscapes and keep client’s complaints to a minimum.

“You got to get into their yard and do as minimal of damage as you possibly can,” Spencer says. “You can take a small mini excavator and a [compact track loader], and you can go in there and dig, install the main, and clean up behind yourself and keep it neat. Keeping a neat house means a lot to the public.”

Last year, Southern Pipeline worked on a project where they handled a 2-mile section on a major highway. They had to go through nearly 400 homes’ back yards, around swimming pools, back buildings and fences. The company knew their customer relationships were vital, so they put an extra effort into their public relation’s efforts. Being able to show minimal impact to yards and landscapes went a long way in achieving this goal.

“We found that talking to the public, explaining to them and not deceiving them on what’s going to happen makes all the difference in the world. Doing follow-ups, going back even after they had their seed and straw done... Having a good standard for integrity and honesty goes a long way.”

At the end of the day, Spencer is happy to have the variety of CASE machines in his lineup. Compact or not, “We’ve had good luck with CASE. They’re dependable machines.”

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