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## Plastic mulch machine can cut labor costs in half

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At a Florida berry farm, it costs about \$200 per acre in man-hours to remove plastic mulch and drip tape at the end of the season. By using a machine that can simultaneously lift and wrap plastic mulch (and drip tape), however, the farm's production manager thinks he's found a way to cut that cost in half.

Bradley Ferguson, production manager at Florida Pacific Farms, recently discovered CropCare's PR2500 online. Seeing the machine's potential to reduce the farm's labor costs, he purchased two and used them in the strawberry fields last season. Ferguson manages 350 acres of strawberries and 40 acres of blueberries for the farm, which supplies fresh berries to Driscoll's.

"We will need several more machines to be able to remove all of our mulch mechanically, but to the extent we used it last season, it appears that we can save at least 50 percent on the labor cost of removing the plastic by using the machine," he said. "I hope to use these machines to remove the mulch on at least half of our acreage this year."

If everything goes well and he can show the labor savings to ownership, he hopes to purchase two more machines the next season and use four total to remove all the plastic mulch from the strawberries.

"If we can save \$100 per acre in labor cost on 350 acres, that would be a total of \$35,000 per season by using four machines," Ferguson said.

According to CropCare, the PR2500 can reduce a task that requires 10 to 20 man-hours of labor per acre to as few as two man-hours per acre. The machine recovers 2,000 feet of plastic at 3 to 5 miles per hour. Its center coulters splits the mulch in two, while reels move plant debris, dirt and vines aside. The two bundles of rolled mulch that result are easily removed from the reels. A center coulters kit can be purchased to modify the machine's capabilities.

"With our two rows of strawberry plants per bed, the plastic has to be cut into three pieces, one cut right down each row of strawberry plants, in order to get it to lift off of the bed and plants without tearing," Ferguson said.

The machine also can lift or wrap drip tape, whether on the surface or buried underneath. And it can be used to remove plastic mulch from sweet corn that's up to 18 inches tall. Shovels lift up the edge of the plastic, while gauge wheels determine the depth of the coulters and shovels, according to CropCare.

Sambhav Sambhav, applied research manager for Driscoll's, said another benefit of the PR2500 is that it helps remove dirt from plastic mulch. Some recyclers will pay to accept clean plastic mulch – because the cleaner it is the more likely it can be recovered – whereas



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disposing of it can cost up to \$100 a pound at some landfills.

CropCare will demonstrate the PR2500 in Oxnard, California, on July 15. For more information, or to set up a demo, email [info@cropcareequipment.com](mailto:info@cropcareequipment.com), or call 717-738-7365.

– *Matt Milkovich*

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