

NextEra Electrical gives glowing review of Bell TLB's cost and performance

When Francois van Wyk decided to buy a new Tractor Loader Backhoe (TLB) recently, he researched the market thoroughly. Over the years he had owned and operated many such machines from different manufacturers and wanted to know what the operational and maintenance costs would be for a period covering 6 000 hours.

Only one original equipment manufacturer (OEM) could give him that information accurately, so he bought that company's machine.

Francois has been an electrician for some 30 years but rather than competing in the overcrowded domestic market, he decided from the outset to focus on electrical reticulation, meaning installing the infrastructure for supplying bulk power and related infrastructure to township developments, industrial parks and plants and to a lesser extent,

government-funded utilities. A variety of projects has taken the company to Mthatha, Tsolo and Butterworth in the Eastern Cape and a current project has a team working at Taung in the North West Province.

"My wife, Lindie, and I have owned and operated other similar companies which we've sold to business partners and NextEra Electrical (Pty) Ltd, a name Lindie came up with, has been in operation since 2017," Francois tells us when we meet on a



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Hendrik Huyser

township development site west of Johannesburg. "We have a core staff of around 20 experienced people, which includes qualified electricians, and we employ and train local labour drawn from areas where we work."

"Our work typically starts once water and sanitation and civil services have been completed, although we do sometimes overlap with these installations when the pressure is on," Francois says.

Installing electrical infrastructure, especially in housing developments means laying cables underground and this points to digging trenches that have to be backfilled once said cables have been laid. Experience had taught Francois and his teams that a versatile TLB is the best machine for these tasks due to its trenching, backfilling and levelling capabilities.

"On this new project we are providing power infrastructure to 600 stands of a planned 4 000 stand development and we were hiring in TLBs from a plant hire company which, as you may well imagine, is a direct and expensive overhead that affects our bottom line negatively," Francois explains. "In January this year we decided to buy

a new TLB for this project believing it would be more cost effective, but we wanted to know what the operational and maintenance costs would be up to 6 000 hours."

During his research of the TLB market, Francois spoke to Bell Equipment's Sales Representative, Geoff Condon, who he has known for several years. "We wanted to know what a new TLB's operational and maintenance costs would be for the first 6 000 hours of its operational life and Bell Equipment was the only OEM that could supply that information confidently and accurately, which is why we took delivery of a brand new Bell 315SL TLB in early February 2020."

According to Francois, his company, acting as main and sub-contractors, has been encouraged to reflect higher levels of local content in its procurement, which includes cabling, consumables and now, yellow equipment.

"We're proudly South African and believe we should be supporting South African companies, and with Bell Equipment that part is easy," he smiles. "There are however other important criteria too that influenced us buying the 315SL TLB from Bell Equipment."



NextEra Electrical Project Manager, Hendrik Huyser (left) with NextEra Electrical Managing Director, Francois van Wyk (centre) and Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Geoff Condon.



Francois states that Bell Equipment's pricing was very competitive but the bigger picture for him comes with reduced maintenance costs due to the machine's service intervals that have been extended to 500 hours, which is double that of the industry norm of 250 hours.

On the performance of the Bell 315SL TLB, we spoke to Hendrik Huyser, NextEra's Electrical Project Manager on the site and a fellow shareholder of the company. "I'm in the fortunate position to also operate the Bell TLB from time to time and I can vouch for the ease of operation of the smooth and responsive controls," he says. "The design of the cab with its keyless and lockout features is great with lots of space and good visibility through the glass and our usual operator got to grips with the finer points of the machine in about an hour."

Both Francois and Hendrik have been impressed with the breakout force of the backhoe boom and the 600mm wide bucket seems the ideal size for their trenching.

"We're currently digging trenches of around 1,5m deep but we're confident that at full reach we could get down to around 4m," Hendrik adds. "We're also considering a 300mm wide rock bucket for harder terrain."

NextEra Electrical works on wet and dry rates depending on the contract but with an average fuel burn of 6 to 8 litres an hour while digging trenches in dense and, at times, damp soil the Bell 315SL TLB's productivity gets more attention.

"On this particular site, we have to bring power right to each housing stand's perimeter in addition to installing street lighting as well," Francois says. "While we work to tight deadlines, we're confident that the increased productivity that our new Bell 315SL TLB is giving us will stand us in good reputational stead and, especially with more contracts being awarded, increasing our fleet with more of the same machines may not simply be a pipe dream."