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West Coast Flowers

FEATURES - SNOW MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS

When much of the U.S. was finally shaking off winter, contractors near Lake Tahoe were still fighting snow all the way into May.

KYLE BROWN, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
August 22, 2011

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Rory Koff is up in the early morning, checking the weather reports. He's getting ready for a shift full of moving heavy snow, taking his Holder tractor and snow blower out to brave the cold.



When he wraps up later in the day, he might meet with his friends at Squaw Valley and go snowboarding.

Moving snow is different on the west coast, where snow piles into feet of white fluff, ice melt is unheard of and the most useful snow moving tool is a snow blower on a tractor.

This year, long after winter had given in to warmer weather for much of the snow belt, clearing tolerances were still being tripped all the way to May in the western U.S.

"We have such a different game out here," says Koff, owner of Acme Snow Removal in Truckee, Calif., at 6,400 feet above sea level. And for Koff (who is also known as the drummer for punk rock band No Use For A Name), that game was harder than usual this year.

The weather that brought the same intense winter to the Midwest dumped more single-storm accumulations of more than two feet than in past seasons, he says. At least three snowfall records were broken, with the snowiest March in 170 years and two different shots at the most snow in a 24-hour period. "I had more 2-foot snowfalls than in any of my past seasons," he says. "There's no such thing as 'a little snow' in Truckee."

Darin Smith, president of Alpine Smith, Inc., in South Lake Tahoe, Calif., says it's partly the height and partly where they are in the country.

"It's about at the Colorado Rockies," Smith says. "The further you go west, the heavier the snow gets and the more demanding we are on our equipment. We'll get storms up to feet; literally, two to three feet will come in one storm in one night. This last winter, we had a storm that lasted for four to five days. It left upwards of five feet of snow."

Not only does the snow come down heavy, it comes in wet, according to Koff.

"Absolutely, it's because of the mountains. I think we just get wetter snow. It just has a lot of moisture in it," he says. "And as soon as it comes down, it compacts. The storms are in and out just like that, and suddenly we've got blue skies."

On top of that, the climate will often drop a rainstorm on top of the snow. The temperatures are too warm to cause freezing, meaning almost no ice forming with it. Because the dense snow blocks drainage and keeps the ground saturated, rainwater can cause flooding or mixes in and creates "a mashed potato consistency," says Smith.

When snow compacts that heavily and the



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landscape slopes into mountains, using a plow to clear a driveway or lot isn't as plausible as it is elsewhere, says Koff.

"Due to us being so close to the ocean, it just packs in. We've got hilly, technical areas to clear with a lot of elevations," he says. "With some of these driveways, there's just no place to put the snow if you're pushing it into another two feet of snow, and then there'll be another two feet that falls two days in a row. There's just no place to put it. You've got to blow it."



"You're not going to see the number of pickups with blades as you would in Ohio," says Smith. "Snow blowers are a necessity. They don't weigh a quarter to a third of what a loader does, and it doesn't have the ability to damage like a loader does. When you're pushing to an area that's got four feet of snow already on it, what are you going to do with that?"

There's an upside to that much snow coming in on a regular basis, however. Commercial and residential customers tend to have a slightly more relaxed perspective on low tolerances, which means less pressure on contractors.

"The tolerance for snow here is much higher than it is back east," says Smith. "If you get a 2-foot storm regularly, suddenly a 6-inch storm is no big deal."

"People here are very capable of walking over two feet to get to their front door," says Koff.

Since a tractor with a snow blower is almost required equipment to do business on the West Coast, the barrier to the commercial industry is higher. There are small operations that just do snow, but many are excavating contractors supplementing summer work with winter clearing, says Smith.



"These are contractors who do half or a third of their whole budget out here," says Smith. "They're contractors who do dirt excavating and construction, and also do snow."

One big similarity to the industry on the other side of the Rockies, however, is the growing reliance on snow removal as a sustaining part of the budget.

"There's just not much going on in California right now," says Smith. "Excavation is down, construction is down. Snow removal is carrying the summer."

Those contractors see less money spent on necessary tools of the trade elsewhere, like rock salt and deicers, which helps counter the high cost of purchasing and maintaining a tractor and attachments.

"We don't use ice melt, we don't salt our streets," says Koff. "It'll get cold like that, but never for a whole season. We get warm days between the storms. We'll have four cold days, then one warm 40-degree day and it just dissipates so quickly."

Another element of the season picks up and vanishes just as quickly: tourism. Though streams of people are constantly entering and leaving the big cities of the rest of the U.S., areas like Lake Tahoe get storms of people just as often as they get actual precipitation, says Smith.

"The tourist economy here literally floods the town," he says. "During the season, a snow event on a Wednesday is absolutely different than a snow event on a Saturday. On a weekend, the population of the town can double or triple, so all the sudden you've got traffic and people everywhere. During Christmas and New Years, you have absolute gridlock out there. It's a very different operation out there. As we're so close to the San Francisco Bay area, we get a lot of daytrippers and weekend-trippers too."

The other half of that flood is a population ebb, which means many of the homes and roads are empty much of the time. Smith puts the number of homes owned from out of town at about 50 percent.

"And about 90 percent of our customers don't live in their homes all the time," he says. "They'll hire a contractor to clear their homes so they can come up on a weekend or use it for a vacation rental for others, just as a means to have a home in Tahoe."

Even a vacant home can be worth money to a contractor, though. During snow events, a contractor still clears the driveway of a client's empty house before moving on to others.

"The whole theory you're selling to the customer is that they'll have access to their home 24 hours a day, you don't have to call ahead to get snow cleared so you can come up to the house," says Smith.

Whether the client is home or not, the business runs the same for Koff, who is set on building his season-contract-based operation up from his 250 homes with a wait list, maybe including some commercial properties in the next season.

"The way I look at it, snow removal is so basic," says Koff. "We're just trying to get people out of the snow and make a buck at the same time."

There are storms for days on end, and double shifts that wear him down, but Koff enjoys the way the snow clears away for bright skies and a promising afternoon on the slopes, he says.

"I get along with these people. I work my ass off for them, but they know how I work," says Koff. "There's nothing like the feeling of finishing a tough route and having blue skies and a great forecast. Nothing like that feeling. The sooner I get done, the sooner I get to go snowboarding."

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