



Today's sophisticated weather forecasting services aren't perfect, but they can bolster a contractor's bottom line in the risky snow removal business

By DAVID WALKER, JR.

WEATHER? Why guess?

Deciding when to call in a snow plow operator is a lot like being a third base coach. As the runner heads for the bag, you've got to determine whether or not to send the player home or have 'em hit the brakes — in an instant. While the coach contemplates things like the outfielder's arm strength and the runner's speed, the snow crew chief must quickly and accurately assess when a snow storm will hit, how long it will last and how much snow will accumulate before calling in an operator.

Luckily for snow plow crews, unlike the baseball coach, forecasting the weather is not based on 'gut' instinct alone. Today, there several forecasting tools and resources available — resources that make winning the battle against the elements a little easier.

Take your pick

Jody Gibson, Nairs Lawn Care, Medina, OH, keeps it simple when it comes to weather forecasting. He tried a computer forecasting tool, but finds the 10 o'clock news can also be effective. He also keeps a weather eye to the sky. "No matter what the forecasters say, I still get up at 1:30 a.m. and look out the window," he explains.

Three other employees living to the north, south and east keep track of weather conditions in their respective areas.

While the Weather Channel on television has its share of devoted watchers among snow and ice professionals, others rely on more sophisticated tools, including the Worldwide Web.

Mike Conley, owner and president of K&M Service Co., Bridge Port, WV, is one of the Web's proponents. "The Weather Channel has a Web site just for our region of the country. It has an updated satellite photo every 15 minutes and it's free," says Conley.

With the aid of his personal computer, Conley is able to maximize the Weather Channel's satellite renderings. "With my PC, I can calculate how fast a storm is moving by backing up the pictures and then putting them in motion."

Joe Ball, assistant director of campus services and facilities at Buffalo State College, Buffalo, NY, has to keep the roads and walkways clear for the school's 12,000 students and faculty members. During the winter months, he assigns a groundskeeper the specific task of watching the weather. In turn, the groundskeeper relies on the college's campus police to monitor the weather and provide him with constant updates.

"The campus police use a combination of local weather forecasts and the Weather Channel on the internet for information. We've had pretty good success with this setup," he says.

Storm trackers

An increasingly popular forecasting system used by plowing professionals and landscapers is the StormSentry PC, a severe weather tracking service developed by DTN Weather Center, Omaha,

NE. "It can pay for itself in one day by *not* requiring a snow crew to sit around doing nothing," says Kurt Wullschleger, DTN's director of marketing.



John Allin wants forecasts that pinpoint his area — Erie, PA.

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The company claims the service takes all the guesswork out of storm tracking, allowing contractors to be more proactive. The company stresses you don't have to be a meteorologist or computer whiz to operate the equipment.

"It takes about 30 minutes to set up the satellite dish. And it works on a PC Windows environment. All you have to do is point and click your mouse to get current information," says Wullschleger.

The latest 'scoop'

"Our radar screen updates every 15 minutes, so in the middle of a storm you know when it's time to back off some crews and send them home," says Marty McKewon, a staff meteorologist at DTN.

The service is also a valuable tool once a snowstorm has ended. "Often, you need documentation to prove to a customer why you plowed. It gives you the ability to print out time-stamped data that shows radar screens and climatological data like wind speed and precipitation. This is particularly useful in areas where lake affect snow occurs," says McKewon.

How accurate and reliable is the service? McKewon says to ensure quality control, DTN employs 50 meteorologists and has over 600 forecasting locations across the country.

"Every state in the country has at least five locations and most have five to 10 sites," McKewon says.

Those pinpoint forecasts quickly translate into big savings according to John Allin, president of Allin Companies, Erie, PA, and the board president of the Snow and Ice Management Association.

Says Allin, "I have a million-dollar plowing business and it (DTN Weather Service) saves me about \$100,000 a year. We have lots of lake affect snow and the weather can change very quickly. With the system, we can better follow storms. We keep the screen on constantly and get updates every five minutes."

Why does the 21-year snow industry veteran place so much trust in the system? "Most local weather forecasters only work six to eight hours a day. Sometimes, their forecasts are 12-hours old and they tend to forecast for a larger area. I need a forecast just for my area. Plus, the National Weather Service has had a 30% cut in personnel over the past few years."

Robert Wilton, president of Clintar Groundskeeping Services, Toronto, Ontario, has been a subscriber for over five years. His company has nine offices throughout Ontario and keeps around 100 pieces of equipment operating during a snowstorm.

"Snow is very important to our business. We take it seriously," says Wilton. "From



Robert Kinnucan looks "to the west" to prepare for storms in his Chicago market.

November 15 to April 15, we have crews available 24-hours a day and there is always someone in the building. We can see the development of a storm with DTN long in advance and we can see the size of the storm."

Wilton says area snow plow suppliers have also created and installed a local snow plower's hotline. "It's a free service and if you

don't mind listening to a few commercials, it can be helpful, because it's local in nature."

Bob Kinnucan not only serves as president and owner of the Kinnucan Co. in Lake Bluff, IL, he also makes the company's snow calls. He too relies on DTN for precise 'local' information. But for the long-term big picture, he looks to the west.

Looking to the west

"What happens on the Pacific Ocean today will be in Chicago in about four days. I check out the full-page weather map in our local newspaper and it shows the jet streams," he says. Kinnucan, also a licensed pilot with weather training, uses his meteorological experience to help monitor emerging weather patterns.

"Once the storm comes into Minnesota or Iowa, I'll start watching it hour by hour on the monitor in our office. The screens offer a tremendous amount of information. I look for lows, barometric pressure trends and temperatures. I can even put a storm in motion on the system to show ground speed," says Kinnucan.

Is a subscription weather service for every snow and ice professional? Not necessarily. Many operators do quite well without one.

But, knowing how much snow will fall and when it will fall allows the contractor to prepare his equipment and drivers. It's a big advantage for the contractor who can predict it. □

—The author is a freelance writer who lives in Cleveland and often writes about the green industry.



The Clintar Groundskeeping Services Team handles a lot of snow and ice in Ontario. (l. to r.): Jim Maloney, President Robert Wilton, Todd Phillips and Norm Van Duyn.