

M-B Companies keeps the runways cleared for takeoff

Chilton company makes airport snow removal equipment

By [Joe Taschler](#) of the Journal Sentinel
Oct. 11, 2014

Chilton — In case you ever need to move 7,500 tons of snow, [M-B Companies](#) Inc. has a machine that will do the job in an hour.

With about 100 people working in a couple of nondescript buildings in Chilton — population 3,944 — M-B Companies' airport snow removal division makes equipment that is used from Alaska to Inner Mongolia.

It's an example of a small manufacturing company in Wisconsin that designs and manufactures specialized equipment in competition with companies across the globe.

The company is preparing now for the approaching winter.

The equipment it makes must perform in harsh conditions under intense time pressure to keep transportation systems running in snowy regions of the world.

"They have so many minutes to get that snow off (the runway), and if the equipment is broken down, they've got a problem," said Steve Karlin, senior vice president of airport maintenance products at M-B. "Flights are canceled and you have a lot of unhappy people at an airport.

"If you've tried to fly out of an airport in snowstorm, and you can't, you know what that's like."

In the United States, federal regulations require that once an inch of snow falls, runways have to be cleared.

The focus is on something known as coefficient of friction. That's a fancy term for the tires on an aircraft being able to grip the pavement on a runway.

The best way to achieve that is with plows and rotating brooms. The plows have to be made of plastic or fiberglass because steel blades can damage navigation equipment embedded in the runways.

Road salt can't be used because it is highly corrosive to aircraft.

Acres of snow

The rotating brooms — think of long, horizontal versions of the spinning brushes in a carwash — use steel and plastic bristles spinning at 800 revolutions per minute along with blowers to fling snow off runways.

"It's creating a windrow (of snow) just like haying equipment," said Doug Blada, operations manager for M-B's airport snow removal products.

"A broom will get right down to the pavement and give you a better coefficient of friction than anything there is," Karlin said.

This isn't like shoveling your driveway.

Consider that the longest runway at Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee is nearly 2 miles long and 200 feet wide.

An inch of snow on a runway that size equates to about 166,000 cubic feet of snow — nearly 4 acres — that must be moved, Karlin said. "It's astronomical the amount of snow that comes off a runway," he said.

All airports located anywhere it snows must have equipment to remove it.

"Every airport has its own snow plan. Within that, they decide what kind of equipment they need to carry out that plan," said Melissa Sabatine, senior vice president for regulatory affairs for the American Association of Airport Executives. Sabatine oversees the group's annual winter operations conference.

"It's absolutely critical to have the right tools to safely clear the runway and keep operations moving during the winter season."

Competitive bidding

Competition in the airport snow removal sector is intense.

In Wisconsin alone, Oshkosh Corp. in Oshkosh, and Wausau-Everest, the Brookfield division of Texas-based Alamo Group, also make airport snow removal equipment. There are also European competitors.

Virtually all of the equipment is sold through a bidding process to publicly owned airports. With a few exceptions, the low bid wins.

That means quality, reliability, service, parts sourcing — a lot of bids specify a high percentage of American-made parts in the equipment — along with the ability to control production costs make for a constant balancing act for companies competing in the sector.

"If you're not the low bid, you've got a problem," Karlin said.

But if you cut costs and the product is diminished as a result, you have an even bigger problem.

"It's a pretty close, tight-knit group in the industry," Blada said. "It doesn't take long for your problems to be spread like wildfire."

The company declined to share revenue figures, citing competitive reasons.

As far as the shortage of skilled labor that manufacturers are experiencing across Wisconsin, M-B has been able to attract and retain the welders, machinists and engineers it needs, Blada said.

The company employs engineers from the Milwaukee School of Engineering, University of Wisconsin-Madison, UW-Platteville and Northern Michigan University in the Upper Peninsula, Blada said.

Workers at the M-B airport snow removal division take the work they do personally.

"We have a record for every part," Blada said, as he gestured to a worker checking transmission housings. "He's signing his name to it. If we have a problem with that part, his signature is on it."

Karlin has a large video screen in his office, and when winter storms are moving across the country or a nor'easter is hammering the coast, workers on the production floor are watching the situation carefully.

"You know what these folks (airport snow removal crews) are doing with your equipment," Karlin said. "You're on the edge of your seat."

When a snowstorm was hammering the Midwest last winter, snow removal crews at the airport in Indianapolis needed a part for a piece of M-B equipment. A worker in Chilton loaded the part into a pickup truck, then drove all night in a snowstorm to Indianapolis, delivered the part and helped crews install it, Karlin said.

"There's value to a Midwestern work ethic," Blada said.

There's also value in Wisconsin-made products, they said.

Walk through the company's production floor and you'll see equipment being built and readied for shipment to China, Canada and U.S. military installations across the world, as well as airports in places such as Iowa, Minnesota and Michigan.

"We have a customer in Alaska who couldn't get a product they needed," Karlin said. "We said, 'We'll do that for you.'"

The customer was seeking snow removal equipment with a small turning radius that could work in tight spaces.

"This is a leap of faith on our part," Karlin said. "The first unit is very, very expensive to make. We engineered it. We built it. Then you have to take it apart and change it to make that first one work."

European manufacturers are also making similar equipment, he said.

"It's a big gamble, with no guarantee of future business," Karlin said. "But we looked at it and said, 'We think there's a market for this and we don't want the Europeans in the United States.' So it's a blocking move on our part."

"If it was easy, anybody could do it," Blada added.

M-B COMPANIES

- Privately owned by Terrence Cosgrove, chairman
- Founded in New Holstein in 1907 by brothers Otto and Fred Meili and Paul Blumberg, who built agricultural implements.
- Built its first broom — a horse-drawn model — in 1922.
- Operates five manufacturing divisions: airport snow removal products in Chilton; pavement marking and striping in Montgomery, Pa., and Salem, Ore.; corporate office, attachment and multi-service vehicles in New Holstein; and replacement brushes in Chilton.
- Total employment: 250

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/business/m-b-companies-keeps-the-runways-cleared-for-takeoff-b99367019z1-278905241.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.