

Road Maintenance Solutions



CHALLENGE OF NORTHERN ROADS MET WITH MICROSURFACING

There are thousands of miles of roads in Canada's North that not many people will ever drive. With the growth of the oil and gas industry, those roads have become vital for the economy in northern parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Territories, so they must be kept in good repair - a challenge anywhere, and even more in the sparsely populated regions.

Microsurfacing of roads used heavily by oil and gas operations and the residents who live nearby is one method of spending tax dollars to the benefit of the province's taxpayers, and Morsky Construction is providing those services - even when it means hauling equipment where it rarely would go.

Based in Saskatchewan, Morsky Construction has been operating since 1982 and paving roads and highways since 1989. Its parent company was founded by Paul Morsky in the 1950's, recently celebrating its 50th anniversary of building roads. Today, while the original company continues to do the dirt moving work, Morsky Construction has moved on to become one of the few operators of microsurfacing equipment in the province.

"We've had one operator in the province who's been doing it for a lot of years - they're probably the originators in the province, and have been doing it for ten to 15 years. There are two companies who have come in out of Alberta; in the last few years and they've taken a certain amount of jobs," commented Allan Barilla, general manager. "The budget was fairly high, but there was just these three competitors. We figured that Saskatchewan had about a \$12 million budget for microsurfacing, and thought it was about time that someone from the province looked into it."

That was in 2006, a few years after a visit to the ConExpo trade show in Las Vegas where company officials had seen some of the equipment and options available in the industry. Researching the industry turned up some promising information, Barilla noted.

"We watched the bidding trends and how the industry was going, and talked to the highways people who said if they had more competition and more contractors, they would put out more work. All the maintenance people liked the process and what it did for them, the bang for the buck," he noted. "We felt there was an avenue to get quite a bit of work and not hurt the contractors who were already doing it."

The 2006 paving season saw Morsky bid on - and win - the first job of the season...with no microsurfacing equipment in their fleet.

"The competition saw our name on there and were wondering, since we had no equipment, how we were going to do it - they wanted us to sub off the work," Barilla said.

That's when the company touched base with VSS Macropaver, a California-based manufacturer of microsurfacing and slurry seal equipment whose equipment they were familiar with.

"We had previously talked to them...the research that we did showed that the VSS could outproduce any of their competitors, so we felt we'd have an edge because nobody then - and possibly still - has a VSS machine," he said. "We were going in against competitors who had lots of years of experience, and had their foot in the door. The edge we needed was to outproduce their equipment. We have no problem doing that with our machines. It definitely makes a difference."

Working with two VSS Macropaver units, Morsky was able to complete a challenging first year, though problems with supply of the emulsion needed to make the slurry mix placed by the vehicles slowed things. 2007 was a little busier, and 2008 has turned into a very good year for the company, with several large road jobs and one unique visit to the Northwest Territories under its belt. Resurfacing an airport in Norman Wells, NWT, was a tough job all around - especially on the way home, Barilla noted.

"This was the first time we'd been up there, and we didn't know what to expect. The job was very short - we did all the work in one night," he described. "The airport we worked on would only let us work at night...we figured going up that it would take three to four hours, but it took about 12 hours due to things we didn't anticipate."

Microsurfacing requires careful consideration of the weather, and Morsky's crew went to Northwest Territories during a time when the rainy season was looming. In fact, there were showers all around when they arrived to get to work. That rainy season was one reason they needed to get the job done when they did - and keep Norman Wells and its nearby communities connected with the rest of the country.

"Some of the bigger jets, the 737s, were refusing to land when it rained, because they had some pooling water that we needed to fix. If you don't get those 737s landing at your community, you lose your lifeline," Barilla noted.

With daylight right up to 2 a.m., the crew got the job done and headed for home - only to have their equipment, which had to be barged in, take another week or so to get home due to a side trip.

...Continued on page 2



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"You can look at the book and do what the book says, but you do need a feel for it - it's like an art form. Once you get a feel for it and know how the material looks, you can make changes and really get it right," he said. "This will help people who have less experience. It (EZ-Op) knows what's going to happen before you do."

Allan Barilla of Morsky Construction

"One of the communities up there ran out of fuel, so the barge with our equipment had to make an emergency trip further north to deliver some fuel."

Everything got back to Saskatchewan fine, and Morsky has been busy since - busy enough to purchase the newest VSS Macropaver 12B, one that was on display during ConExpo 2008. It's an easy bet that the machine is the only one in Canada painted black with a flame job - and it's also the first to be equipped with the new EZ-OP control system.

"It's got a new electronic operator's system that helps control every aspect of making the material, plus it gives you monitoring capabilities that nobody's ever had before, like the quantities of material used and whether it's on track to meet your spec's," Barilla explained. "It gives you the operator a better idea of what's going on internally in the machine."

Knowing more about the material and how the paver is mixing and placing it helps make the operator's job easier, but there's still a great skill to handling the equipment.

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**Morsky Construction
2006 Macropaver**



Rut Filling in Canada

VSS had to turn the machine around quickly when Morsky purchased it - they hadn't expected a Canadian company to be the first buyer and needed to do some Metric conversions, Barilla said. Since then, VSS reps have been on the job site with Morsky to fine-tune the EZ-Op system.

"They just flew in from California and spent a few days with us to do some data collection on the new operating system. It worked well for us...they got a really good understanding while it was out on the road, and they're now making changes they'll send to us to make our life easier," he said. "We give them feedback all of the time. We're new to the business - they have companies they've worked with for years and years, and yet they make changes based on what we've told them."

With a trio of VSS Macropavers in the fleet, Morsky Construction has been able to make quick work of jobs this spring. In June, they completed a big job in one of Saskatchewan's oilfield areas.

"The traffic count there is incredible - it's all oil related. We were able to do 20 kilometers in seven days with that traffic, without slowing them down that much, and now they have a smoother road to ride on. When it rains - and it rains often - they don't have to worry about hydroplaning; this got rid of the ruts those heavy loads leave," he said. "As traffic picks up more, they may decide to put another lift of asphalt on there, but for the moment it's in great shape."

By Lee Toop, Editor
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