

Could You be Working on the Railroad?

Power washing railcars and locomotives is a lucrative niche market

By Terri Perrin

You are waiting at a railroad crossing, the warning lights are flashing, the barrier is down, and a seemingly endless stream of railcars are moving methodically past you. As a child you may have tried to count the cars ... just for fun ... but today, you see them as an obstacle hindering you from getting to your next job site on time.

Paul Horsley, president of Scotts Pressure Wash, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, sees railcars in a different light. When he gets stopped at a railroad crossing he starts doing the math ... counting the number of railcars as potential units in a profitable service contract.

The rail industry is a large and relatively untapped niche market for the power washing industry. There are legislated requirements for railcar operators to dry sweep and/or steam clean the boxcar interiors before they can be used to transport different products; locomotives must be cleaned after a specified number of hours of service; and power washing is part of a regular maintenance and corporate image management service. All of these requirements open windows of opportunity for new service providers.

Scotts Pressure Wash has been working with the railroad since 2004. What started as a simple request for exterior washing (with mandatory wastewater recovery) has now expanded to include several value-added services such as: dry sweeping boxcars, paint touch-ups, graffiti removal, oiling gates, repairing hatches and more. He now has two operations in the province of Saskatchewan that provide these services: one is full-time, year 'round and the other is seasonal.

Horsley believes that you should not be intimidated by a lack of experience *specifically* related to the railway industry – everyone has to start somewhere. He says that contractors should feel confident in venturing into this market niche if they have a few years of experience in power washing and waste water recovery, written best management practices, professional affiliation with an organization like the Power Washers of North America (PWNA), and have completed the PWNA's railcar cleaning training program, .

"I was, too, was hesitant when I was first asked to submit a bid to power wash railcars," explains Horsley. "At the time, the rail industry was unfamiliar territory and I wasn't entirely comfortable bidding on the job. However, after thinking about the pressure wash process and with confidence in my team, I submitted our bid. We won that contract, and several more since then, and we have never looked back."

Some rail transport companies may have their own power washing equipment and service locations, but more often, they are using contract cleaners to come to specific locations to do the work. Your challenge, in sourcing potential new contracts, is to get to know your market by researching the companies in your area, then contacting the strategic sources manager (purchasing agent) for each company. You may be directed to someone else within the company, but this person is the best one to start with. Bear in mind that if they say they have a current service provider there is no guarantee that they are 100% happy with the service or the price. They may very well be open to new bids the next time the contract is up for renewal ... it never hurts to ask.

Before preparing a bid, it is imperative that you know the type of railcars you are being asked to clean. As importantly, you need to ask your client if there are any company- or industry-specific regulations you need to be aware of. When washing locomotives, for example, water applied under pressure to the disk brakes may cause corrosion, resulting in brake failure. Since this significant safety hazard has been identified as a major risk, the American Association of Railroads has circulated written guidelines that dictate waterproof tarps must

cover the brakes before any power washing begins.

Location is also a major consideration. Where the work will be done? Who owns the land? Are there any environmental constraints? Is there an available source of water and a place to dispose of wastewater or does water have to be hauled in and out?

Horsley says that you can expect railway industry contracts to have tight deadlines. The rail company needs to get their railcars back in service as soon as possible. It is not unreasonable to be asked to clean one unit train – consisting of 125 railcars – in as little as three days.

To provide service to the rail industry you will require:

- minimum of \$5 million in insurance liability;
- power washing unit and long hoses;
- waste water recovery mats and water extraction equipment;
- tanks to bring in clean water;
- tanks to collect and haul out waste water;
- a 4-wheel drive lift truck with industry approved personal protection (PPE) equipment to prevent falls;
- industry-approved wheel protection covers;
- chemicals and soaps including but not limited to: sulfuric acid, ammonium bi-fluoride and hydrofluoric (used 50/50 strength);
- appropriate PPE for chemical use.

With the appropriate equipment on site, railcars should be cleaned using a seven-step process:

- 1) Cover/wrap wheels to keep the control valves, brake cylinders, slack adjusters and roller bearings dry.
- 2) Install wastewater recovery mats and commence water collection.
- 3) Two-step roof (Apply chemical wash, then rinse.)
- 4) Two-step sides and under carriage.
- 5) Graffiti removal. (May require manual scrubbing.)
- 6) Apply degreaser to what?????
- 7) Rinse entire unit, top down, including undercarriage.

For more information on railcar contract cleaning and procedures, contact the Power Washers of North America. www.pwna.org

[Sidebar]

U.S. Railroad Industry Snapshot

Moving goods by rail is an economic and environmentally sound choice. One train can carry the load of 280 or more trucks. The 565 freight railroads operating in the United States are vital to North America's economic health. They form a seamless integrated system that provides the world's most efficient, cost-effective freight service. American railroads directly employ 209,000 people and operate using 160,000+ miles of track. On any given day, over 24,000 locomotives are hauling 1.36 million freightcars: 416,000 on the American Class 1 railroads; 108,000 railcars on other rail networks; and 839,000 passenger cars and other shippers. Adding railcars from Canada and Mexico boosts this total number to 1.56 million freight cars.

Source: Association of American Railroads

Major Class 1 Freight Railroads in North America

BNSF	BNSF Railway
CN	Canadian National Railway
CP	Canadian Pacific Railway
CSX	CSX Transportation
FXE	Ferrocarril Mexicano (Ferromex)
KCS	Kansas City Southern Railway
NS	Norfolk Southern
KCSM	Kansas City Southern de Mexico (Formerly TFM)
UP	Union Pacific

Source: Association of American Railroads. Reprinted with permission.

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