

Just scraping by

SNOW CONTRACTORS SING THE BLUES

In years with little snow, they're the winners, but this winter customers are getting a deal

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THE GAZETTE

Don Cools, owner of Dénéigement Husky, is anything but cool when he describes the workload his staff has had thanks to this winter's prodigious snowfalls.

"Horrible! It's the worst, a nightmare. Right now we're clearing snow for free," Cools said yesterday, coming in from a 12-hour shift.

Montreal is just shy of a 293-centimetre seasonal record for snowfall up to this date, set in 1971. By yesterday afternoon, Environment Canada had counted 285 centimetres at Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport.

Residential snow-removal companies like Husky typically sign customers up for a five-month contract, Nov. 1 to March 31.

Cools compares the money spent to insurance. In years with little snow, he emerges as the winner. This year, it's the homeowners who have come out on top.

"On average, the past few years, we've gone out once a week. We've surpassed that for sure this year," Cools said.

So far this season, his crew has worked 22 days, making multiple passes of the same properties during a particularly heavy snowfall.

Averaging \$300 to \$350 per household in the Côte des Neiges area where he operates, those fees work out to between \$13 and

\$15 per job.

The money is locked in in October and November and Cools has no provision to add additional costs should the snowfall exceed a certain amount, as some residential snow-removal companies do.

"Those percentage clauses are tough. Once people have paid up front just try to collect more," Cools said.

"I have fixed salary costs every week and the rolling stock of

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CONTRACTOR CHRIS KANE

three tractors and three pickup trucks.

"The variables are the cost of diesel fuel and mechanical breakdowns. Prices will have to go up next year."

Chris Kane, owner of The Lawn Company (TLC) on the West Island, said raising the price of residential snow removal would be the smartest thing to do.

"We budget for 20 outings and I lost track at 15," Kane said of this year.

Even in years where the snowfall is light, he still has to pay

salaries and maintain his business, and fuel costs have risen considerably in the past few years, he noted.

"Some years we're over and some years we're under," Kane said.

The frequency and the accumulation of this year's storms have meant more trips and more work.

When a heavy snowfall begins at 4 or 5 a.m., it's all hands on deck for the morning rush and then a repeat tour later to clear the paths and driveways again.

"For a couple of hundred bucks, we do some driveways two and three times a day," Kane said. "We're working for peanuts. The kid next door wouldn't shovel your driveway for \$3."

However, contractors who work for the city of Montreal and most other municipalities aren't crying in their beer this winter.

Those operators, who generally sign five-year deals, are guaranteed a minimum amount for fixed expenses and then paid by the centimetre of snow, said Yves Girard, who heads Montreal's snow clearing operations.

For the past 25 years, Montreal has averaged around 200 centimetres of snowfall per year, Girard added.

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SNOW JOB OR NECESSITY?

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