

Kirk Landers — Editor Emeritus

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Innovating Out of the Recession

Just before cold weather set in, Illinois-based Gallagher Asphalt demonstrated a new hot-in-place recycling (HIR) technology for the City of Chicago.



kirk.landiers@att.net

Unlike traditional HIR processes, which heat and rejuvenate surface asphalt in place, the new Gallagher process heats the old asphalt, then scoops it into a rotating chamber where it is thoroughly mixed with a rejuvenating oil, and then places it back on the roadway with a paving screed.

The overarching benefit to the new process is that the rejuvenated surface course does not need an overlay or chip seal, like traditional HIR requires.

In terms of its significance to the heavy-construction industry, the Gallagher demo is a minor event. Hot-in-place recycling occupies a small slice of the pavement maintenance market, which is a fraction of the highway market, which is a fraction of the heavy-construction industry.

Seen through another perspective, though, it is the definition of how recessions end.

In the road industry, pavement budgets are swinging overwhelmingly to prevention strategies – interventions that extend the life of healthy pavements – because there isn't enough money to tackle rehabilitation on a large scale. It will be years before this changes.

Gallagher's substantial investment in what it calls re-heating HIR technology is a move to address the demands of a changing market. The company is the oldest and largest asphalt producer in Illinois and a leader in traditional HIR contracting. As a life-extending option for road agencies, the new process holds the prospect of lower cost – or, in the realities of our times, more lane miles of treatment for the same amount of money.

Less than 20 miles away, a company called Southwind RAS is completing its second year of collecting and processing old asphalt roofing shingles into a product that replaces up to 25 percent of the liquid asphalt in an asphalt mix.

Like Gallagher, the company's leaders saw an opportunity in a changing market and invested in it. For Southwind, the opportunity stemmed from the run-up in asphalt cement prices in 2008. Even after liquid asphalt prices settled at around \$400 per ton, Southwind's recycled asphalt shingle (RAS) product costs less than half that much.

Demand for RAS is strong in Southwind's marketing area, primarily because of the price advantage, but the product also lowers asphalt's carbon footprint. Used in conjunction with reclaimed asphalt pavement (RAP) and warm mix technology, RAS helps make asphalt one of the greenest manufactured products in the world.

Gallagher Asphalt's new in-place recycling technology also delivers its lower cost with a lower carbon footprint, the benefit of 100-percent recycled asphalt pavement and a process that eliminates haul-truck traffic to and from the jobsite.

There is a small lesson here, and a big one. The small lesson is, we are in an era of limited resources and we all need to adapt to the new realities. The big lesson is, the Great Recession is creating mega-changes in the U.S. construction market, and in any historic market shift, there will be new opportunities for those who are aware and willing.

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