

STINK CITY

Cleanup on aisle 401

When 2,184 cases of beer spill onto the highway, who you gonna call? Centennial Sweeping, that's who.

With about 100 specialized vehicles at the ready, the North York company is "the only game in town" when a truck loses its load, says Sergeant Cam Wooley of the OPP. Whether it's lager, milk, fuel, clay, manure or frozen foods, Centennial mops up the spill, he says the company gets 200 such calls a year.

It had a crew on Highway 401 on Wednesday after a Honda Civic hit a Molson delivery truck, causing it to roll over and lose its sudsy load at about 6:30 a.m. "One truck used at the beer spill is outfitted with port a-potties and food storage, since sometimes these jobs last six, seven, eight hours" says owner Bob Chabot, 62.

Another keeps its load of sand heated, the better to absorb spills. The 10,000 gallon water trucks used for rinsing off roads get a few side gigs for rain making on movie sets, and servicing such things as the misting towers at the SARS concert, and water stations for the pope's visit.

It was about eight or nine years ago, the OPP first approached Centennial "We need some help out there. It takes too long, no one knows what to do. No one has the machinery" they said. To do what you want to do you have to bend a lot of rules,"

For one, the company needed clearance to drive on the shoulder. Which it now has. And Mr. Chabot got to work upgrading and tinkering with his trucks, always older vehicles because he's not fond of electronics. "When you work with the finest dust there is, it causes problems" he says "trucks die at the side of the road, these trucks don't have problems."

Within minutes of Wednesday's beer fiasco, Centennial had about eight vehicles on the scene. "I saw it on TV before they called me" Mr. Chabot says, sitting in his sunny kitchen office on a huge muddy lot on Toryork Drive. "We had it cleaned by 12. That's extremely good." First they sucked up the spilled fuel. Then they dropped heated sand and an absorbing material called Absorbol on the pools of beer. Next they swept up the drenched sand and sprinkles on a new batch that they left behind. Dump trucks filled with waste went off to be weighed, the contents then sent to a company that cleans it before it goes to landfill.

"Everything has a ceremony attached to it," he says. And a price tag. His fee for Wednesday's gig was about \$20,000, which will be covered by insurance.

And while the spilled beer made for some joke-ridden news headlines, Mr. Chabot says the clean-up efforts were serious business. Like all liquids, beer has what's called a Biological Oxygen Demand rating that indicates whether it can cause a film to form in water, blocking off oxygen and killing fish and other wildlife. Beer's rating is "as bad as milk" he says. "We mix it with sand to prevent it from going into the sewer."

For anything dangerous - including large quantities of fuel - Centennial calls in specialists, especially when chemicals have seeped into the soil, which will require digging. "I'm not a chemical engineer," Mr. Chabot says. "A little bit of knowledge can be dangerous."

He started the business in 1967, hence the name, and has been an avid photographer of the company's handiwork over the years. One shows an 18-wheeler on its side, a typical job: "This guy took the wrong ramp on the 401 and went to Allen, and when you get off the Allen - she's a little sharp. We cleaned up a bit of oil on the road, did traffic control and scrubbed the road."

Another set of photos are from a job last Saturday - a diesel-fueled spill at the 401 and Avenue Road. "Years ago, a job like this would have taken a whole day."



Photo: Saul Porto

Sgt. Wooley says jobs that used to take up to 24 hours can now be done by Centennial in as few as four. "Not to sound too dramatic, but he's saved lives by clearing highways," he says of Mr. Chabot, citing a fast cleanup as lowering the risk of secondary collisions.

The weirdest job has to be the time that a trucked from Saskatchewan - 10 minutes from his destination, poor guy - dropped a load of powdered eggs.

After Mr. Chabot and his crew picked up the powder, they went to wash away some of the residue with water. "Ooooh," he says, leaning back in his chair "It was like cake batter on the sweeper. It jammed the machines up. We never expected that."

He says diesel fuel is the most common cleanup and it's pretty safe - unless it heats up and turns into a mist. "It's good that the fire department always gets there before us."

Before he launches into another story, Mr. Chabot's daughter, Lorraine walks into the room. She's getting ready for her wedding the following night. And no, there was no free beer kickback from Wednesday's job.