

Weather or Not helps KCI Beat Christmas Blizzard

The Christmas blizzard caused headaches throughout the Kansas City region, making driving dangerous, keeping road crews and snow plow operators busy and stranding many people on snow-packed residential streets.

But despite more than 8 inches of snow and blustery winds, planes continued to take off and land at Kansas City International Airport, which never shut down during the storm, unlike some of its Midwestern counterparts.

“We didn’t turn anybody away, and we didn’t keep anybody from leaving,” said Rich Weems, the airport’s field maintenance supervisor.

The difference, Weems said, was highly specific weather forecasts from Shawnee-based Weather or Not Inc., which helped his crews spread de-icing chemicals on runways and taxiways only minutes before snowflakes began to fall, making it much easier to then sweep the snow off the pavement before it stuck.

In past years, he said, crews would have had to repeatedly spread the chemicals as the hours of rain that preceded the snow would have washed the de-icer away. That led to higher chemical costs and less efficient use of his workers.

“We didn’t have to treat and retreat and retreat,” Weems said. “We made one application, and it was good through the entire event.”

Weather or Not’s president, Sara Croke, said the winter storm was the first of its size in Kansas City in at least 20 years. She said the combination of rain and wind made planning for road maintenance crews throughout the region tougher than usual.

“When you go from rain to sleet to snow, you can’t put the chemical treatment down and expect it to still be there hours later,” Croke said. “Timing is everything.”

Weather or Not’s staff of meteorologists, who serve as in-house experts for everyone from building contractors to the Kansas City Royals, provide customers with up-to-the-minute weather information for specific areas of town. In addition, the company can call or text message clients to let them know weather patterns will be changing soon — which helps the clients plan accordingly.

For example, the company also worked ahead of the storm with a number of small Kansas City-area governments that didn’t have the luxury of keeping large public works crews on 12-hour shifts like their larger neighbors.

John Sullivan, public works director for Westwood, said he has a street crew of three, including himself. He said that when Weather Or Not let him know the storm would be a prolonged event, he sent his workers home early Christmas Eve and had them come back that night to begin spreading chemicals and plowing.

“If I had not had that resource, I would have held folks here right up through the storm” and been forced to both pay more overtime and deal with an exhausted staff.

Also knowing the snow would continue falling well into the weekend, Sullivan said he didn’t bother treating city streets on Christmas Day as the chemicals would be less effective. That’s a big help when those chemicals run \$57 a ton. Although the city has gone through 65 tons or 70 tons of chemicals since Christmas Eve, he said it would have been much higher without the weather information — and that may have caused him to run out of material ahead of subsequent storms.

“We haven’t had any accidents through these storms,” he said. “That’s how we measure success.”