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# CONSTRUCTION **exec**

## GREAT NORTHWEST: THE LONG ROAD TO SUCCESS

CEO John Minder explains how this company thrives as the last independent civil contractor in Alaska



# Great Northwest: The long road to success

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Written By Gabe Perna



Great Northwest CEO John Minder's tale could probably inspire even the most cynical of people. In 1974 he moved from Montana to Alaska with US\$509, a 1953 Chevy pickup, and a 1951 Martin guitar. After working in the pipeline for a few years, along with associate Howard "Buzz" Otis, he began a small landscaping business which eventually turned into one of the largest civil construction companies in Alaska.

The most amazing aspect of Minder's journey to the top is the fact he did it in a tremendously tough industry in a notoriously tough state to survive. In addition to the usual trials and tribulations of the construction industry, the company also must work in con-



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THE GREAT NORTHWEST MANAGEMENT TEAM

sort with the treacherous Alaskan climate. As a result, its employees get about five to seven months of actual working time each year to finish millions of dollars worth of projects.

Fourteen-hour days while working at projects miles and miles away from the company's Fairbanks, Alaska base are the norm for Great Northwest employees. Minder says the winter away is the toughest part.

"We bring our equipment back home in the winter and go through it in shop. When it leaves the shop

you can't afford it to not be in tip-top shape. From November 1 to April 1 money goes out and not much comes in. We occasionally work for oil companies but we have not done a project in the winter for them since 2002 and 2003," says Minder who adds the company employs 240 in the prime construction season and only 30 for the winter.

#### HIGHWAYS AND MORE

While Great Northwest may have started out in landscaping, these days the primary source of busi-

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ness comes from civil construction and supplying materials. Minder says the biggest projects usually are highway based and the Alaskan Department of Transportation is its biggest customer.

"Right now we're working on a highway that goes from Alaska through Canada to the lower 48," he says. "We are working on the portion that goes from the Alaskan border to Delta, Alaska. In addition in the last five years we've picked up three Alaska emergency projects.

"There was quite a large earthquake that destroyed a cut-off road that saves about 300 miles. It was

totaled so last November we went and fixed that up. It was opened again in about two weeks. We did work from November to January on that," he says. "Another was the flood on Richardson Highway."

Great Northwest is the last independent civil contractor in Alaska, an advantage that allows the company to do the aforementioned emergency projects. The company also performs private civil construction work and is a supplier gravel resource material. Minder says there are some interesting projects currently under way.

"We just did an 800-acre army

"We bring our equipment back home in the winter and go through it in shop. When it leaves the shop you can't afford it to not be in tip-top shape"

- JOHN MINDER, CEO



center in Donnelly Dome. Part of it was set up for urban warfare training and the other part was a big training center for strike and brigades for those in Iraq. We're also working on an international airport taxi way," he says.

### SAFETY CONSCIOUS

Minder says safety comes foremost in the construction industry and at Great Northwest. In addition to holding weekly safety meetings, the company has a safety rewards program designed to maintain a safe conscious attitude.

"You can have all the regulations in world, if you don't have the mind-set of safety, then those regulations can be thrown out the window.

In addition to safety, Minder says he likes to see a clean job site. He believes if the job site is clean and orderly, accidents are less likely to happen. "That's another pet peeve of mine, messiness of the job site. I go out on a job I expect it to be clean, neat and orderly. That's company wide. If guys don't get it after the first time, I have a talk with them. I have an eye for detail, maybe too much. I pay attention to

contractors. I can tell when a job is being run right and when it's not. If you have things neat and orderly, safety will follow," he says.

### SUCCESS THROUGH PEOPLE

While many companies of its ilk have gone by the wayside, Great Northwest has survived and prospered. Minder gives credit to the people he has surrounded himself with as the primary reason for the company's success. "If I had to attribute our success to one thing it would be our people," he says.

"The money is usually the same,

the equipment price is usually the same, and the work usually gets done. The one thing that's different is the people you surround yourself with. I'm lucky because we have a low turnover rate. This is my 33rd year. We have guys who've been here 30 plus years and 20 plus years. These are guys that I brought on when we kept getting bigger and bigger. If you stay a year, you usually stay period. We've got a good reputation for taking care of a people. Your people are the ones who will make you or break you in this business." ■

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### COMPANY AT A GLANCE

COMPANY NAME:  
Great Northwest

ESTABLISHED:  
Late 1970s

EMPLOYEES:  
30 year round, 240 prime seasonal

REVENUE:  
US\$54 million

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