



# CLEAN SWEEP

*Terrapex Takes On Contaminated Real Estate*





**Written by Allison Dempsey**

As it reaches an impressive 25 years in the industry, Terrapex, a 100 percent Canadian-owned firm with offices in Toronto, Ottawa and Burlington, continually proves its value as a contender in the engineering and geosciences fields, often competing with much larger companies while demonstrating an outstanding reputation in the assessment and remediation of contaminated sites.

While that remains the core of its business, Terrapex has expanded its clientele and service lines consistently over the years, all in keeping with a diverse and experienced company that continues to grow and diversify.

Some of Terrapex's other areas of proficiency include geotechnical design, construction inspection and materials testing, building condition surveys, building science/engineering, environmental regulatory compliance and expert witness testimony. With thousands of successful public and private sector projects under its belt, the company continually strives for innovation and exceptional service for its diverse clientele.

Established in 1995, Terrapex's origins were in handling contaminated real estate, focusing mostly on the petroleum industry. The company expanded geographically both within the province and across the country, with registered offices now also located in Smithers, British Columbia, and Calgary, Alberta.

"For most of the past 25 years we've grown very slowly, cautiously and steadily," says CEO Mike Osborne. "We've flown under the radar; we've been a little consulting firm that nobody's ever heard of. A few years ago we realized that if we want to grow the company to the next level, we have to raise our profile."

In 2017, Terrapex started a hydrogeology service line to complement real estate development, followed by ecology and health and safety service lines in 2018. "All of these things go along very well with our core business, either complementing or relating to contaminated real estate or development," says Osborne. He adds that expanding service lines even further is a priority for the company.

Being a member of the Inogen Environmental Alliance has also given Terrapex an impetus to provide new services for clients across the country. Inogen, an international alliance of environmental consulting firms that provides multinational organizations with high-quality and cost-effective environmental, health, safety, energy and sustainability solutions, assists clients by resolving past liabilities, addressing requirements and delivering solutions. It boasts more than 200 offices located on every continent, with projects completed in more than 120 countries. ►►



▶ “We’re the primary Canadian associate for Inogen,” says President Jennifer O’Grady. “That gives us access to multinational clients doing work in Canada, which is huge for an Ontario-based company with about 80 employees.”

Inogen has been interesting for Terrapex in many ways, says O’Grady, including informing the company’s strategic plan. Inogen enables Terrapex to see trends coming from Europe and the U.S., which tend to be precursors of what the industry does in Canada.

“The Inogen model is also something we’ve been able to mimic in a small way within Canada in order to provide services to our clients,” she says. “We’ve developed partnerships with a number of local, or specialized consultants, and that’s how the Inogen model works.”

One consultant will get a project, and if it’s a multinational project then Terrapex retains consultants in the geographic locations where the work needs to be done. “We’ve been able to develop partnerships with other similar like-minded consultants, some of which offer different services and projects,” she says.

Osborne adds that attending Inogen’s associates meetings twice a year around the world has also been extremely beneficial for Terrapex. Inogen conferences mean two solid days in a room with the leaders of various well-renowned consulting companies across the world, says O’Grady. Associates talk about issues they’re all facing and how to market each other’s services, and attend workshops.

“It’s a really good experience,” she says, “especially the connections you make with other people. We’ve actually had opportunities for employees as well. We’ve ended up hiring people looking to relocate to Canada.”

Members meet each other on a regular basis and get to know each other, says Osborne. “I think there’s a more personal connection, strange as that might seem, between the 70 associates than you might find in a typical global consulting firm.”

That’s one of the reasons it was started, adds O’Grady – to deal with dissatisfaction and communication gaps felt by clients with projects in multiple geographic locations.

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“Being part of Inogen informs our strategic planning, because we see the work that’s becoming important and common in Europe typically first, and then in the United States, and our experience has been that the things that become important in the States follow shortly thereafter in Canada,” says Osborne. “Ideally we’re able to position ourselves with those things.”

Sustainability is one of those issues they see growing both around the globe and within Canada. “We’re definitely seeing a demand,” says Osborne, although it’s not yet one of the services Terrapex offers in-house. At the moment, the company has associate companies in Canada that are a go-to if clients need it, but it’s a goal Terrapex will strive to reach itself as it expands.

As O’Grady mentions, the company is relatively small, especially in comparison to competitors, so continuing to grow is a priority in the coming years.

“It has always been our philosophy that for our company to succeed it has to grow,” says Osborne. “If you want to keep your people you have to provide them with opportunities.”

While Terrapex has not grown at a tremendous pace, it has always grown consistently, he says, citing geographic growth and service expansion as examples. But Terrapex’s smaller size has also been an advantage over the years.

“One thing that sets us apart from our competitors is our mid-size company feel,” says O’Grady. “We compete against a lot of very large firms in this space and one thing we hear from our clients is that there’s a lot of bureaucracy at those firms. They end up talking to different people all the time, which leads to inconsistent quality.” ▶▶

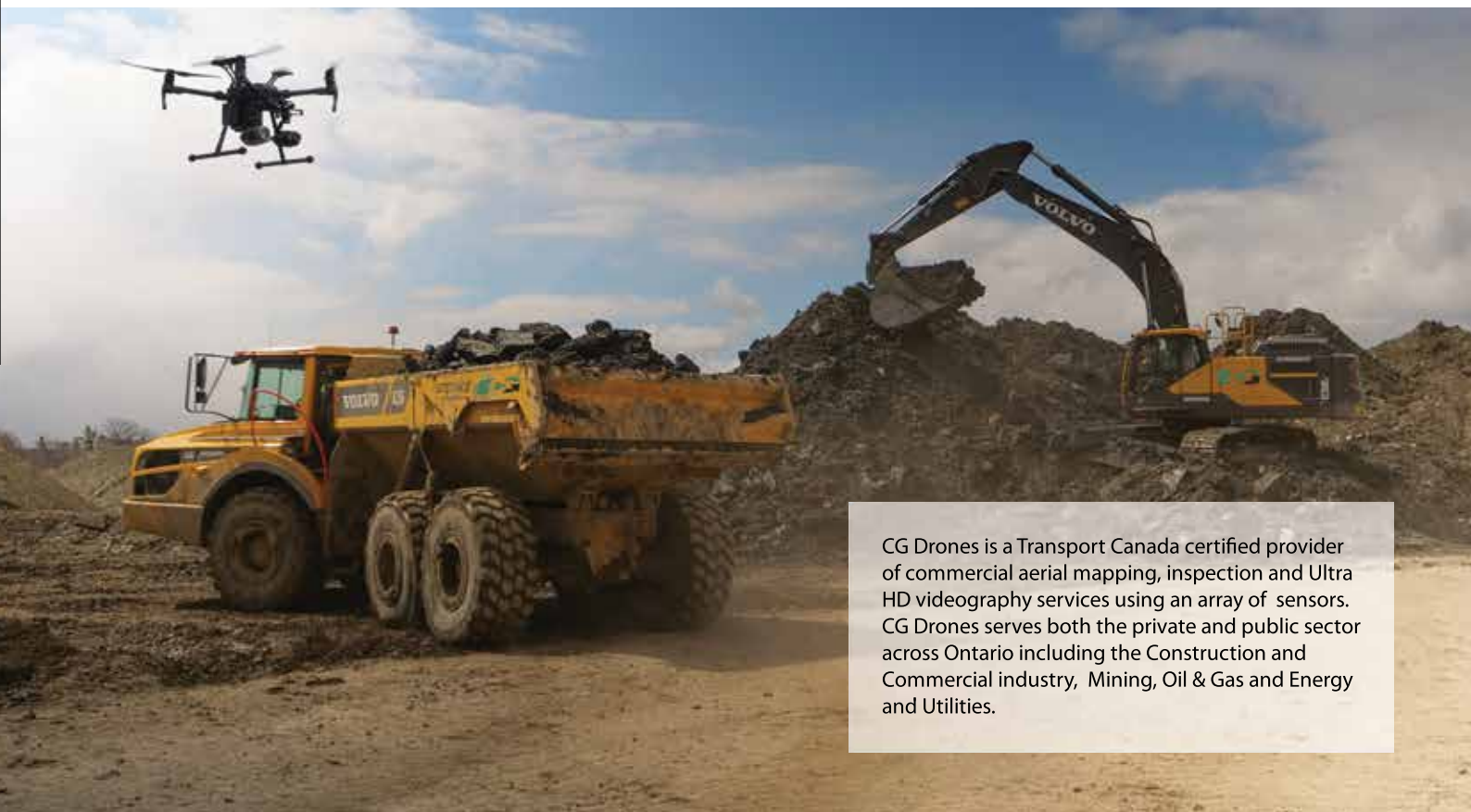




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▶ “At Terrapex, we strive to have all clients call and speak to the same point of contact directly each time,” says Osborne, adding that it’s difficult to maintain that consistent quality when you’re not a traditional niche company. “We struggle to be mid-market in terms of price but top-market in terms of quality, and that’s our agenda,” he says. They both say that maintaining quality and meaningful relationships with both clients and employees is key.

“We wouldn’t have any relationship with our customers if we didn’t have really good employees,” says Osborne. “More than a third of our employees have been with us for more than 10 years, and some have been [with us for] 20 years or more.”

“Quite a few people have spent their entire career with us so far,” says O’Grady. “These are people who have worked in the industry a long time and haven’t felt the need to leave after a few years. It’s actually been a challenge as well for us to accommodate the growth of these people. We want to provide more opportunities.”

Employee engagement is very important to Terrapex, which means creating autonomy at the senior level and giving people responsibility to do their own work. Even as the team grows it’s important to maintain a small company feel, says O’Grady. Terrapex has worked hard to have an open door relationship between all levels of staff, creating a family atmosphere that includes team building events to foster healthy relationships.

“We’ve had feedback that we’re not a company that makes clients feel anonymous,” says Osborne. “We offer personal service, because we believe client communication is key and we pride ourselves on that.”



Terrapex also prides itself on strong employee retention, but the test lies in meeting employee needs as they grow and continue to advance their careers, says Osborne. “It’s a challenge to keep them challenged and engaged. It’s a good problem to have, but it’s still a challenge.”

Another ongoing challenge throughout the industry at large is finding good people, he says. The environmental industry has been growing for as long as Osborne has been in it, and he doesn’t think there has been enough resource development to support it. An industry-wide problem, it’s one that Terrapex has handled exceedingly well. “I think we’ve done a very good job of hiring very good people,” he says. But there are other more pressing challenges to address, he adds.

As the core business of contaminated site assessment is increasingly commoditized, it’s become – for some – cookie cutter, and has also driven the prices and the margins down.

“It’s not something we want to abandon; we’re good at it and it’s what we know, but we have to adapt our business to remain competitive in those core areas,” he says. “It’s one of the things that has driven us to diversify our services so that we can continue to do that work, but augment it with other less commoditized, more cerebral work.”

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One of the things Terrapex has been able to maintain is quality. “That’s something that tends to slip as you get bigger,” says O’Grady. “Finding the right balance between having those systems in place to maintain quality and stifling people with those systems is something we’ve always had at the forefront of our mind, as well as various checks and balances. We know we did a really good job of that with our core businesses, and we can extend that quality as we grow.”

And managing to compete with larger companies in this field is a source of true pride. “There’s been a lot of consolidation within the industry,” she says. “We don’t have the recognition or the brand power, but we do win jobs and get clients.”

“We punch above our weight,” adds Osborne, who says that the company’s low profile sometimes leads to a misperception of its work and purpose. “Some people think we’re tree huggers while other people think we’re slaves to the corporate dollar and trying to help big corporations duck their responsibilities,” he says. “My perspective is something in between. I think a lot of people who look to us are motivated by the belief that

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they're doing good work for the environment, but we also do work for big corporations. There's no denying it, but the reality is that large corporations have some fixed dollars or resource level that they can devote to environmental issues. Our job is to get them the greatest environmental benefits for the dollars that they have to spend."

As the company reaches its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, exciting changes are in the works, including restructuring and positioning for growth, plus a chance to reflect on the past and look to the future.

"It's kind of like a turning point for us," says Osborne. "Our very first client almost 25 years ago is now our biggest and best client. We've kept that client and many others for a long period of time. We work to develop relationships; it's a service industry and it really is all about personal relationships. Even though we keep a low profile, we do a good job developing and maintaining relationships and plan to keep doing that in the future." ■

Content Developed by Leslie Landry | Designed by Yoana Ilcheva



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