

# Five things to think about when buying a tarping system

*And why the tarp is as important a buying decision as the trailer itself*

The primary purpose of a rolling tarping system is to protect the freight you're hauling, but the system you choose will have a direct impact on your profitability for up to a decade. That's why you should give as much thought to the tarping system you purchase as you would to the trailer itself.

Choosing the wrong tarping system can reduce productivity, limit the types of loads you can haul, increase downtime and lead to cargo damage. The good news is, today's tarping systems have never been better, according to Paul Vandenberg, president of Brantford, Ont.-based Trison Tarps.

"These systems have really improved, as far as the rolling of the systems and the longevity of the systems," he said.

Still, no two sliding tarping systems are the same and it pays to do your homework.

## Choose quality

Inspect tarping systems closely – especially the seams – to see how well they've been constructed.

"They all look good when they're brand new," says Lloyd Verduyn, president of Verduyn Tarps. "It's when it gets to be used a little bit, usually after six months, that the quality starts coming to the front."

Verduyn related the story of a customer who purchased an inexpensive tarping system elsewhere and had to return to the supplier for repairs 24 times over a 22-month period.

"He bought a system that used a lot of parts from offshore and two weeks later he was back for his first repair," Verduyn cautioned.

Geordan Gay, sales and marketing director with Chameleon Innovations, suggested examining the inside

of the tarp for quality.

"If you look from the inside, you'll see that a well designed tarp is usually reinforced around the rail area and the top corners," he explained. "It's not just one layer of fabric wrapped over. We've got about 50 ounces of fabric down near our rail locations and about 40-some ounces of fabric near the top corners."

Also examine the door area. Gay warned against the use of Velcro, which can come loose over time. Mechanical closures cost more but will last longer, he said.

## How about support?

If you're a long-haul operator, consider the ease of service while on the road. Can repairs be made by any tarp or trailer shop? How about those covered by warranty; can you get the work done on the road or do you have to return to the manufacturing facility? These are some of the questions Gay said you should ask of your supplier.

"One thing that is really important is, where is that warranty supported?" he pointed out. "A lot of warranties state you need to come back to the factory if you want the repair to be done free of charge."

Rolling tarps are designed to last up to 10 years, but will likely require some service over that time. How quickly will repairs be made?

"A week of lost loads can really cost a lot," Gay pointed out. He said to choose a tarping system that can be easily repaired by any tarp or trailer shop and to shy away from welded assemblies that need to be ripped apart for repairs.

Verduyn tells customers to ask other users about product quality and support.

"The best bet is to talk to other owners," he said. "I can't stress that enough."

## Right-size the system

Some tarping systems impede on the cargo area, reducing payload and potentially ruling out certain sized loads. Talk to your supplier about the dimensions of the tarping system and the requirements of the freight you'll be hauling.

"Choose a manufacturer that has thought about a way to maximize your load volume," said Gay. Is the bulkhead installed in front of the deck or does it extend into the cargo space? Many are mounted on top of the deck and a 48-ft. trailer becomes a 47-ft. trailer. Width is equally important. Slimmer tarping systems will allow for wider freight, especially important if you plan to haul containers or certain building products that require a full 102 inches of deck space. Having a couple extra inches of width also affords some room for error for forklift operators who don't load the cargo completely square.

Gay also suggested customers consider the benefits of combining a lower deck with a higher tarping system, rather than automatically choosing a standard 98-inch interior height.

"When you're doing LTL, do you really want to be stuck with only 98 inches of interior height when you could have had 104?" he questioned, noting with a low deck, a 104-inch interior height is achievable while staying within the 13'6 overall height allowance.

"We try to find out as much as we can about what they haul and what their needs are," Vandenberg noted.

## Maintenance-free?

The maintenance-free tarping system sounds appealing but a little effort can go a long way towards extending tarp life. Operators should wipe down the rails every time they've been loaded, Gay suggested.

"There are lots of loads that dump mud or dirt onto the rails. Imagine a wheel scraping up against your rail with the addition of little particles of dirt. That wears through aluminum quite quickly so it's very important to wipe down the rails quickly after loading each time or at least inspect them to make sure there's no debris on the rails," Gay cautioned. Verduyn is a proponent of greasing the wheels and ratchets, even if they are purported to be grease-free.

Vandenberg said drivers should be trained on proper use of the system as well as maintenance requirements, especially if they're unfamiliar with the equipment or have been using a different system.

"It's probably wise to have training on the system before it leaves the location where it was purchased," he said.

Drivers should also inspect the system for loosened connections and regularly replace rail protectors. Any rips or tears should be duct-taped immediately and taken in for proper repairs as soon as possible, before the damage gets worse. Also consider the wheel material. Some suppliers have adopted nylon or rubber wheels in place of steel, citing better longevity.

## The convenience factor

Finally, choose a tarping system that's easy to operate, especially with an aging workforce. Verduyn said one customer says he'll be able to work an extra 10 years because of the simplicity of operating a rolling tarping system, which can be operated entirely from the ground.

Vandenberg thinks the industry will see even more innovation in ease of use, indicating electric systems are likely the way of the future.

"An automated system of some sort will take the marketplace," Vandenberg predicted. But Gay countered that sometimes simplicity is better.

"When you're out on the road and an electrical or air system fails and you can no longer tension or lock your tarp system, what do you do then?" he reasoned. "As new technologies come, you have to be really sensitive about, what is it going to take to fix this in the field if it breaks?" ●

