

“...in accordance with...”

The IDOT Influence

By Randell C. Riley, P.E. As a ready mixed concrete producer you may never sell a single cubic yard of concrete directly to Illinois Department of Transportation, yet somehow its influence extends into almost every part of your day to day business. Should it? Is that a good thing? Is that a bad thing? And does that make you a better or a worse producer of concrete? The answer is not an easy one or necessarily a comfortable one. In today's environment where a handshake rarely means anything anymore, except opening up your company to a higher probability of litigation down the road, the influence of IDOT is pervasive.

It should not be that way because, frankly, IDOT is in business to do one thing. Build roads! Despite this seemingly obvious point, architects, engineers and attorneys frequently reference IDOT specifications and standards with good intentions but with a total disregard for whether or not it is indeed appropriate.

A quick Google search of the exact phrase "Illinois Department of Transportation standards" will yield 6,030 results. In some cases the use of those standards may apply. In others, they are nowhere near close but are referenced anyway. In fact, I would regard the seemingly innocuous buzz phrase "in accordance with Illinois Department of Transportation Standards" to be one of the most misused and abused phrases in contract or regulatory language in the state. And the fact that we as an industry allow it to occur or that architects and engineers reference the specifications in this manner is the result of either laziness on our part or lack of understanding on the part of specifiers.

In an earlier column I pointed out how little specifiers actually know about one of the major products they use in almost every project they build: concrete. I am regarded as somewhat of an expert in the field of concrete materials and concrete pavements. I did not learn what I know today about concrete materials or pavements in engineering classes. I did learn what concrete was and what went into it. I learned a few cool terms like slump and

water-cement ratio. The significance of the terms at the time and the actual interactions of the two were a bit vaguer. And forget about the interactions of the aggregate gradations on the two. We didn't have time for that as we immediately had to turn the pages of our books to learn about another product, asphalt, and we were similarly educated to about the same level of ignorance.

Frankly, the use of the earlier referenced buzz phrase "in accordance with..." is largely a means which specifiers use to cover their own lack of knowledge on the subject, and they feel it is OK since, of course, IDOT knows better.

Please note that there is nothing wrong with IDOT using their standards for their work, but frequently the standards used by IDOT impede the use of solutions that may better serve the actual needs of the end use customer. For example, where could you find pervious concrete built "in accordance with...?" Right now you could not. We ran into much the same thing with promoting the concrete overlay market.

Consulting engineering firms, which should know better, would not even consider concrete overlay techniques until IDOT put its stamp of approval on the techniques and they could put "in accordance with..." on the specifications or design. IDOT becomes the vehicle behind which they can hide to avoid potential litigation when they have to think outside the box or consider something they have never seen. I cannot say as I blame them in today's environment, but it also means that the industry moves forward at a slower pace than it otherwise might. All new products and processes the industry puts forward are plagued with this problem.

And the industry itself is somewhat to blame for the situation. How often have you as a producer responded to a problem on a project with a shrug of your shoulders and, "Well, it met IDOT standards!" Were they the right standards? Were they the best standards for the application? Might it be possible that they are indeed the wrong standards for a particular application? And might you have known that had you thought about it for a bit?

Years ago in a neighboring state DOT's laboratory I cut my teeth in this business and learned that there is far more to concrete than slump and water cement ratio. Through years of experience, you as producers have learned, too, some good lessons and, occasionally, some bad ones. There are better ways to do things, and you likely know of better solutions than the specifier. This potentially presents some opportunities for you to build a better mousetrap and maybe make a little more money along the way.

So, the next time you receive a phone call or review a proposal with the classic buzz phrase, "in accordance with..." do not be afraid to ask the customer if they are absolutely sure that is what they really want. We are moving towards contractor and producer control of mixtures, and you are going to be held accountable for the situation regardless, so take control of it if you have a better solution.

In this business the customer is not always right, even if it is IDOT.

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