

Briny business grows

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Few people put much thought into salt. A small shaker of it sits on nearly every table, it goes into almost all food we consume, and it's one of the world's most bountiful minerals.



Driver Glenn Longenecker loads bulk salt into his truck for delivery to a commercial customer of Lancaster County-based The Cope Company Salt, supplier of commercial salt and brine. Photo/Amy Spangler

John Connell puts more thought into salt, but that's because he's general manager of [The Cope Company Salt](#) in Lancaster, a supplier of commercial salt and brine and a maker of a brine-mixing apparatus called [AutoBrine](#).

"We try to regulate the quality of the salt," Connell said, "because if you put dirty salt in a system, it breaks down."

Cope recently bought an entire year's worth of salt to feed its own brine-making capabilities as well as raw delivery to hundreds of commercial customers for use in AutoBrine systems.

Cope builds the AutoBrine system onto large water tanks. The system is a series of tubes that mixes the proper proportion of salt and water for brine. Food manufacturers, pharmaceutical companies, retirement communities, and schools use the brine for water softening and manufacturing processes.

Cope's clients include [Kellogg Co.](#), [Bayer Corp.](#), [GlaxoSmithKline](#), Lancaster County-based [Turkey Hill Dairy Inc.](#), and [Mars Inc.](#), all of which have facilities in Central Pennsylvania or nearby.

"Once we put a system in for a customer, the pain of salt goes away for them," Connell said.

The client never again moves its own salt, nor worries about injured workers as a result, he said. Cope

installs the system. Its computer tells Cope when to deliver salt. If something is wrong, the company fixes it, he said.

Dauphin County-based [The Hershey Co.](#) had used Cope's AutoBrine system for water softening at its East Chocolate Avenue plant that closed, spokesman Jeff Beckman said. However, Hershey no longer uses the system, he said.

Smaller companies use Cope's above-ground storage tanks and the company delivers premixed brine to the customer.

Although Cope bought a year's worth of salt, at times only one truckload of fresh salt is stored in its shed. Cope has eight trucks constantly running salt deliveries, combined with its own brine production, Connell said.

He declined to say how many tons was purchased, but the shed holds 800 tons of salt, and it was only about a quarter filled. The single dump-truck-load of new salt was less than an eighth of that pile.

"The thing is, it's constantly moving," Connell said.

Salty business

Total salt production in the U.S. was worth \$1.6 billion in 2012, but total volume has declined by about 16 percent to 40.2 million tons, according to the [U.S. Geological Survey](#) data on the industry.

In part, salt production drops are due to milder winters, according to USGS. About 41 percent of total salt sales is used for road de-icing, while chemical industries such as those that make chlorine and caustic sodas for plastics use about 39 percent of salt sold.

"You just see a big focus on responsibility and scientific evidence ... Sometimes, that means less salt, but using it more efficiently," said Lori Roman, president of the [Salt Institute](#), a Virginia-based trade association.

That's especially true in road de-icing and water softening, she said.

However, there is some disagreement among the salt industry, researchers, health advocates and government agencies.

"The government is putting out misinformation on food salt," Roman said.

U.S. dietary guidelines had recommended the general population aim for sodium levels between 1,500 and 2,300 milligrams a day based on a 2005 [Institute of Medicine](#) report.

In May, however, [the institute found no benefits](#) to the general population reducing its salt intake below 2,300 milligrams. Doing so could have adverse affects, including heart disease, it said. Some Americans consume too much sodium, but moderation is better than drastic cuts, especially for healthy individuals without high risk factors such as diabetes.

Clean and green

Locally, Cope's salt business has been performing well, Connell said. Cope has seen single-digit revenue growth every year since 2009. The company, which is privately owned, declined to share its revenue.

"We're constantly selling new (AutoBrine) systems," Connell said, calling them the "life-blood" of new salt business.

Some companies use the systems to improve their green rating when seeking LEED certification for facilities, he said. Cope generated statistics estimating the monetary and carbon footprint savings to companies using AutoBrine versus bagged salt.

For example, Virginia-based candymaker Mars, which has an AutoBrine system, saved \$13,215 in 2012 and reduced its carbon footprint by 37,000 pounds of carbon dioxide, Connell said.

And from start to finish, Cope handles the entire salt operation for companies.

"I tell my customers, you buy a pound of salt, you get a pound of service," Connell said.

Brackish numbers

Salt is one of the most common minerals on planet Earth and can be found not only in the oceans but also in numerous deposits on every continent and in nearly every country.

In fact, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates, "World continental resources of salt are practically unlimited, and the salt content in the oceans is virtually inexhaustible." With such abundant resources

come abundant numbers. Here's a look at 2012's briny digits:

280 million: World salt production (tons)

73 million: China production (tons) - No. 1

40.2 million: U.S. production (tons) - No. 2

\$1.6 billion: Estimated dollar value of U.S. salt production

28: Number of salt production companies in U.S.

41: Percent of salt sales used for road de-icing

4: Percent of salt sales used for food processing

8: Hours of illumination from a Japanese salt-powered lantern

10.5 million: Tons of salt imported for U.S. consumption

Source: U.S. Geological Survey

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