**Hard-up Ohio buys salt supplies from distant Morocco**

By David Patch, Blade staff writer, Toledo Blade

*Soaring domestic cost forces move.*

With salt mines dotting the lower Great Lakes region, one might think the area would always have ample ice-melting supplies no matter the weather.

But last winter’s record-setting snowfalls and bitter cold depleted Midwestern salt stockpiles and drove up domestic prices so much that an Indiana company has turned to salt from the north African nation of Morocco to fulfill some of its orders — including a big one from the Ohio Department of Transportation.

With bids having come in at more than $100 per ton for winter deliveries to 11 Ohio counties — most of them in the state’s northwest corner — and no bids at all for 10 more counties, the state arranged with Midwest Salt of Fort Wayne to import 171,600 tons through the port of Toledo.

Andrew Thiele, Midwest Salt’s president, said soaring domestic prices and lack of supply “allowed us to bring salt from overseas into the Midwest.”

“Typically, we’re purchasing from domestic producers as well, but this was the next-best option,” said Mr. Thiele, whose company owns no mines of its own.

Midwest imported a lot of salt last winter too, but it primarily came through East Coast ports or was barged up the Mississippi River system, Mr. Thiele said.

Economics of the current salt market made it profitable to bring salt from Morocco.

It is not unusual to bring in salt from other countries; it’s about where the supply is available and at what price.

Midwest’s first ODOT shipload arrived early this month at the Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority’s general-cargo docks, and at least four more ships have been booked, Joe Cappel, the agency’s director of cargo development, told the port’s facilities and development committee last week.

Steve Faulkner, a spokesman at ODOT headquarters in Columbus, said the state will provide trucking service to get the salt to stockpiles as needed, so all the communities buying it through ODOT will need to pay for is the salt itself.

The state’s $105.25-a-ton price from Midwest is more than triple the $32 or so that many communities paid for rock salt before last winter, but it’s still better than what many faced for supplies this year, Mr. Faulkner said — if they could get any at all.

ODOT bid two salt contracts this year — one for summer replenishment of stockpiles depleted by last year’s extreme weather, the other for resupply once winter starts.

Bids were requested for state delivery points in each of Ohio’s 88 counties.

The replenishment bids ranged between $40 and $70 a ton for all counties, Mr. Faulkner said, but the resupply bids were another matter. In 11 counties, the lowest price was $100 or higher — including a high of $165 per ton for Defiance County delivery.

ODOT rejected those bids, which along with Defiance applied to Lucas, Ottawa, Williams, Fulton, Sandusky, Seneca, Wood, and Henry counties in northwest Ohio and the Youngstown-area counties of Mahoning and Trumbull.

Attracting no bids at all were ODOT contract advertisements for wintertime deliveries to Allen, Putnam, Paulding, Hancock, Wyandot, Van Wert, Hardin, Auglaize, Logan, and Mercer counties, Mr. Faulkner said.

Toledo is not struggling as some other areas are for salt this year.

Lisa Ward, executive assistant to the mayor, said the city has a contract with Cargill for its salt following bids that went out in late March.

As of September, the city had some 80,000 tons of salt on hand. Ms. Ward said the city’s new contract with Cargill was for $48.95 a ton.

During an average winter, the city uses 40,000 tons of salt for area roadways, but it used nearly 60,000 tons this last winter.

The state plans to keep at least some of the salt at the Toledo port until it is needed, Mr. Faulkner said.

“We’re saving local communities potentially hundreds of thousands of dollars in transportation” by providing trucking from the port to county garages, the ODOT spokesman said.

Mr. Faulkner said he did not have a list handy of how many local and county agencies had signed up for ODOT’s new salt supply.

But one that made a recent reservation is Perrysburg Township, which early this month agreed to buy 500 tons from Midwest through ODOT and has a reservation for another 500 tons during the winter.

The inbound salt cargoes are expected to further boost port activity that is already well ahead of last year’s volume.

Salt is not an unusual cargo at certain docks in the Toledo port, but it typically comes here from mines in northeast Ohio or southern Ontario — not from overseas, and not to the port authority’s dock.

This year through September, Toledo port terminals handled 7,090,033 tons of cargo, up 16.24 percent from last year.

The 352 vessels that visited the port represented a 41-ship increase, including 18 overseas freighters, up from 12 during the same period last year.

The largest cargo increase by weight was in the coal sector, which was up by more than 500,000 tons, while the greatest percentage increase was in general cargo, up 54.47 percent to 174,667 tons.

The one cargo sector down so far this year in Toledo is petroleum and liquid bulk, which through September was off by 37.95 percent to 79,042 tons.

General cargo includes such high-value shipments as steel coils and aluminum, and it provides more work for dock workers than do coal or iron ore, whose terminal facilities are heavily mechanized.

Salt is classified as a dry-bulk cargo, a category that includes such commodities as stone, bulk sugar, and pig iron.

Mr. Thiele said Toledo’s port worked well for his company to bring in the Moroccan salt.

“Strategically for us, it’s a good location for the region, the territory we cover with our sales,” Mr. Thiele said.