



# On a roll

If 2020 is best forgotten, has the GSE sector been ignored also? The Editor catches up with those proponents of the beltloader to find out.

**W**hilst the recent 12 months have been tough, the aviation sector hasn't exactly shut up shop. Aircraft have still flown and there has been a demand, albeit in most cases reduced, for GSE. The beltloader, by its nature, is one example that cannot be overlooked in this context.

Wollard International's Tim Taylor, who is Director of Business Development, declares that despite the odds, his company has risen to the challenge – and met it head on.

"In the context of the pandemic-influenced growth reversal in the aviation industry, we were able to see growth," he says. "We experienced fewer individual beltloader sales, but an increase in volume from multi-year contract fulfillment. We have offered multiple power options, that is, multiple diesel options, petrol, LP as well as electric, with long term acquisition strategies which include trade-in, leasing and technology upgrades. I'm not exactly sure to which of

the various factors to ascribe the success, but it seems to be resonating. We are grateful for growth, particularly in the midst of the disruption. One of the 2020 beltloader multi-year contract acquisitions included our IATA 913 compliant collision avoidance system. It does appear that collision avoidance systems' use on beltloaders is becoming significantly more widespread."

COVID-19 notwithstanding, Wollard found time for some interesting R&D work.

"The most significant new development during 2020 has been the integration of autonomous driving capabilities. Our first project was with a baggage tractor, but we envision having an autonomous airside eco-system. Our technology partner is ThorDrive, based in Cincinnati. We are looking at significant safety and efficiency improvements being realised as the technology is adopted. We have also fully integrated collision avoidance systems on all equipment."

As an aside, Taylor mentions that Wollard has a new, conventional pushback tractor in the prototype stage: this will be available in electric as well as Stage 5 diesel format.

## The green side

To its credit, the manufacturer has made great strides in terms of the environment.

"All of our ramp portfolio is available in Tier IV Final, Stage 5 and 80V electric," explains Taylor. "We are also integrating on board telematics to establish operational metrics, which include environmental data points such as time in use, idle and adverse driving, in addition to battery status monitoring."

"Ultimately, we are attempting to put the pandemic into perspective, that the downturn hit bottom in April 2020, and that we are currently in a growth phase. If we think of it as an opportunity to convert older internal combustion-engined equipment into new, environmentally conscious support

equipment, with advanced technology for efficiencies and safety, such as collision avoidance, telematics, autonomous driving, asset pooling and the like, we believe that 2021 is the perfect time to engage for growth. Granted, for many GSE operators which have excess equipment capacity, this is an opportune time to be prepared for the time when travel volumes return to previous levels. An analogy from American football, as well as world football, is that when we are on the offence we pass the ball not to where the receiver is, but to where the receiver will be. Our GSE fleets should be prepared for where we will be as the pandemic wanes and our customers fulfill their suppressed desire to travel once again.”

### The specialist

Ben Reeves at Power Stow remains sanguine about the pandemic and the knock-on effects.

“Like most of the industry, we experienced a downturn in 2020. We were fortunate in that a number of customers left their orders in place and we were able to pick up a few new customers in 2020.

“Because of the increased focus on cargo activities during the pandemic, we received more interest from cargo customers towards our extendable beltloader system, as the Rollertrack Conveyor system not only helps handlers to load or unload bulk cargo easier and more efficiently, but it also enables social distancing in the cargo hold.

“Furthermore, last year, we introduced our flexible rental programme, which is one of our solutions to the uncertainty that our customers are facing. It allows them to take advantage of all the benefits that our system offers with a flexible pricing model.”

Like many others, Power Stow made use of the enforced downtime to address its range and tweak where necessary.

“We have been fine tuning and testing our assisted docking system over the past year and anticipate releasing it later in 2021,” he reveals. “We’ve also made several design improvements on the Rollertrack Conveyor that help reduce the total cost of ownership. Furthermore, we are continuously working on additional features on the Rollertrack system to improve efficiency and make the handling process even more convenient for operators when handling packages, mailbags or other types of bulk cargo.”

Equally, matters green have not been overlooked.

“Our model has always been to let our customers choose the brand of beltloader



chassis and power source, namely petrol, diesel or electric, so our production simply follows our customers’ plans. But we have seen a growing interest towards the electric chassis in all markets during the past few years, especially in Europe and Asia.

“We believe that 2021 will be a better year, but it will be a recovery year for the airlines. We expect all ground handlers to be very focused on ensuring a lean and competitive operation, with optimised operating costs in 2021.”

### Global operations continue

For some respondents, like TLD, sales and developments embrace the global theatre rather than just the US. Sébastien Fabre is COO at TLD’s St Lin plant and he was able to comment on the company’s progress in terms of beltloader sales during the pandemic-ridden year.

The manufacturer’s NBL is the horse for many a course: a modular item of equipment (in line with TLD’s philosophy), it can be configured with a range of power plants, including petrol and diesel engines as well as an electric motor; moreover, powershift or hydrostatic transmissions are also offered.

“In terms of the NBL, yes, we found that the market suffered last year, in common with all those involved in serving the passenger

sector. We have noticed that the European market demand has dropped significantly. It seems to me that the Chinese market was impacted less, though, along with that of the US; the reason for this is down to the fact that both continents have been buoyed up by a strong internal demand compared with other countries around the world.

“For our purposes, the 8 metre model with ASD (Aircraft Safe Docking) has been the prominent indicator of market preference and is a benchmark. We have discerned, more and more, a move on the part of customers towards devices that can aid the operator: by this I mean docking wheel aids and Power Stow type systems and others that can assist the ramp staff when working in the hold.

“It goes without saying that the level of interest in electric continues to rise. Encouraged by the latest emissions regulations in Europe, we can say that there is a strong basis for moving away from less powerful, old technology driven GSE. After all, we are now seeing that the cost of an electric beltloader is closing with that of an example running on a traditional engine – and over the long term, the battery option will be a more competitive solution.”

Textron’s Brad Compton says that with the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, sales continued to be slower than prior years. But work carried on regardless.

“The TUG 660 beltloader line remains a trusted and reliable product that customers depend on to drive efficiencies within their operations. In 2020 we continued to partner with Power Stow to offer customisable solutions designed to meet the needs of our cargo and ground handler customers. Additionally, we took an opportunity to maximise the efficiency of our world-class manufacturing facilities and systems to position the business for ▶

Power Stow (above) may look conventional but saves on labour and reduces back injury (right)





future demand and a healthier industry.”

According to Compton, Textron GSE continually looks for opportunities to enhance and deliver new products, and 2020 was no different in this respect.

“In September, we launched enhancements to our TUG 660 beltloader family that included a CE-certified option for our AC electric model, expanding its reach globally. The petrol, diesel and LP models were upgraded to a 4LHD transmission with a transmission-mounted brake and protection system. TUG 660 models also feature greater ergonomics, parts commonality, a return to neutral functionality and a shift inhibit feature.” As with many manufacturers today, safety is a prerequisite: a host of customisable options are also available now from Textron, including Smart Sense collision avoidance technology, that offers a safer approach to baggage and cargo loading by utilising ultrasonic sensors attached to the front of the TUG 600 beltloader. These slow and stop the equipment when needed, to avoid costly aircraft damage.

Textron GSE offers several electric models, including the TUG 660 beltloader model which benefits from zero emissions and an AC drivetrain. Textron is also building new products utilising lithium technology, which generates operational and eco-friendly advantages. Lithium products, declares Compton, offer efficient performance, and conserve resources such as water by eliminating the need to maintain batteries.

Finally, did he have any thoughts on how he saw this year shaping up?

“Textron GSE remains confident that with the development and deployment of vaccines around the world, the industry will begin to recover from the effects of the pandemic. By offering a diverse product portfolio that appeals to a wide range of customers and



Mallaghan (top) has found a niche in the US; TUG boasts enhancements; Wollard (below) reports a busy year

industries, Textron has continued to receive orders for delivery in 2021.

“The Textron sales team has also been meeting with customers around the globe to offer solutions during this unique time. Our focus is to provide cost effective equipment and service solutions that can enhance productivity, reduce cost and maximise operational efficiency.”

### Bending it...

Mallaghan’s Bendibelt has been around for a few years now and is another example of a modified approach to the “bread and butter” beltloader.

At the time of writing the company fields some 50 units that are seeing service across North and South America: they are deployed by such carriers as United and JetBlue. A typical “Americas specification”, says the company, is one that entails a unit fitted with a petrol engine (usually Ford or Kubota), along with a trombone style safety handrail.

The manufacturer’s Joe Griffith, US Commercial Manager, points to various qualities and advantages of the Mallaghan Bendibelt. “The hydrostatic powertrain

with dynamic braking allows for a safe approach to the aircraft,” he says. “An easily integrated controlled approach is possible and the engine is mounted in an offset manner to prevent personnel from having to crawl underneath the belt.

“Additionally, we supply a purpose-built, dedicated chassis with full integrated emergency procedures for the easy removal of the belt section. The continuous flight system is especially advantageous for cargo, parcels or boxes; and social distancing can be observed, with just one person working in the hold.

“Compared to our nearest rival, we feel the Bendibelt has significant commercial value, being around 30% less expensive than any competitor. There is a lower TCO, based on a simpler design and a vast reduction in the need for individually powered rollers. Easier maintenance also comes into the equation.”

As REN went to press, Mallaghan announced that there was now a major focus on lithium ion battery technology and that demonstration units would be made available in North America from the third quarter of 2021. High voltage options are also now under development. REN

