

Road snow teams ready with 80,000 tons of salt

The Beverly Hills-based Road Commission for Oakland County will be ready for winter's onslaught. Even a few snowflakes right now should not be a problem, said commission spokesman Scott Kingan, because ground temperatures have not fallen dramatically. If slippery conditions are encountered, Kingan said, they will be seen on overpasses and bridge decks.

Orders have been placed for up to 80,000 tons of road salt to keep the roads passable this winter, reports maintenance department director James Dunleavy. In a normal winter, at \$28 a ton, the road commission will spend about \$2.24 million just for salt.

"The fact is, whether on the basis of cost or overall effectiveness, salt remains the best available product to help ensure the safety of the motoring public," said Dunleavy.

While salt will again be used on many of the 2,600 miles of roads the commission is responsible for maintaining, salt can't be used on gravel roads; sand is used instead. Conversely, because it has no melting ability and can eventually clog sewers and storm drains, sand is used only selectively on paved roads. The road commission has a fleet of 140 salt trucks and 24 graders. They travel 96 pre-established routes created based on traffic flow volumes and the

amount of time it takes drivers to complete each route.

A systematic alert system is used to call in drivers in the event of precipitation that occurs outside of regular working hours. From Nov. 1 to mid-April, the road commission has a designated "Snow Duty Officer" on call 24 hours a day. These people follow guidelines to decide how many drivers to call in, and when.

Since some storms can produce significant precipitation and last a long time, the road commission has trained extra volunteer drivers who can relieve the regular road crews. "Because safety is our first priority, our policy prevents people from working longer than 16 hours without at least a 5.5-hour break," Dunleavy said.

"Depending on what you include in the equation, the presence of winter in northern states is a key contributor to road deterioration from potholes and other damage that results from a freeze and thaw cycle. That's why any comparison of road expenditures in northern vs. southern states must take all the costs of winter into consideration, costs that some other states need not bear," Dunleavy said. Not counting equipment costs, the annual winter price tag for salt, regular time and overtime is about \$6.5 million — just for the road commission alone.

Overtime goes with winter like

salt on the roads. It is often while receiving overtime pay that much of the road salt is applied. For the 1996-97 winter, the road commission has budgeted some \$2.2 million for overtime costs.

Trucks and other road equipment are another major cost of grappling with winter, Dunleavy said. "There is nothing more damaging to a truck than winter maintenance. Our seven- and 12-year dump trucks (which cost \$85,000 to \$98,000 respectively), carry many heavy loads of corrosive salt. The vibration of the plows against the roads also wreaks havoc on them. Maintenance of these vehicles is critical and so is our need to replace them on a timely basis. Even so, we manage to get about 10 years of service from our trucks and about 15 years for the \$140,000-a-copy graders."

As new trucks are ordered, the road commission is equipping them with a computerized salt

spreading apparatus that adjusts the amount of salt use based on the speed of the vehicle. "For salt to be effective, we must put down 800 pounds per two-lane mile of pavement. Unfortunately, due to traffic or other situations, trucks may need to go faster or slower. That forces drivers to manually adjust the amount of salt they put down," Dunleavy said.

The new "compuspread" units automatically compute the speed and the amount of salt needed. "These units add about \$4,000 to the cost of each truck, but we think anyone who has lost control of a vehicle on a road that needed more salt would agree they're worth it," Dunleavy said.

Of all the roads in the county, bridges and overpasses are the first to get slick, road commission drivers personally check bridges and overpasses, and special sensors on some bridges and overpasses linked to computer monitors at the Dispatch Center

in Waterford Township indicate when slippery conditions have been detected.

Another common situation in winter creates a kind of public relations problem. "Our Citizen Services Department and dispatchers often receive many calls from people asking about when their roads will be plowed or insisting that they must be. One person called to insist we clear their road and driveway because

they were going to miss an airline flight. The problem is, we always have the responsibility to make primary roads safe and passable first. Only after that can we turn our attention to other roads or subdivision streets," Kingan said.

All drivers are receiving additional, special training, conducted each year at the Michigan Center for Decision Driving at the Eaton Proving Grounds.

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