

NCPR – The In Box
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BLOG ENTRY

Is road salt being used too widely on North Country roads?

May 18th, 2010 by Brian Mann

A couple of environmental groups — Adirondack Action and the Adirondack Council — cosponsored a conference this week at Paul Smiths College that aimed to focus some fresh attention on road salt pollution.

Their primary concern is sodium contamination that's hitting local lakes, rivers and groundwater. Lake Colby, on the outskirts of Saranac Lake, is one of the most polluted bodies of water in the Adirondack Park.

The Cascade Lakes have also been hard hit and state Department of Transportation Officials acknowledge that sodium dumped from their trucks helped to kill beautiful stands of birch that used to grow along the roadside.

But at this conference, the most vehement voices raised against the overuse of road salt didn't come from greenies. The real passion came from local highway maintenance supervisors.

"You're eating that [salt] constantly," complained Craig Donaldson, highway superintendent in Harriestown. "You're tasting it in your mouth all winter long."

According to Donaldson, using salt aggressively to maintain bare roads causes too much corrosion damage to cars, dumps too much pollution in lakes and groundwater, and it's too expensive.

"We don't have to have a level of service just because someone wants to drive the road sixty miles an hour year round," he insisted. "I'm sorry, we can't do that anymore. Nobody can sustain that anymore."

The price for salt has been rising, along with fuel and maintenance costs for trucks.

Tracy Eldridge, highway supervisor for Hamilton County, agreed that the desire for clear roads in far-flung rural areas may be unsustainable.

"People expect bare roads," he said. "People have to understand that you cannot accomplish that."

The DOT's Robert Winans acknowledged that sustaining the current level of service may be tough given the state's budget crisis.

"Can we sustain that level indefinitely? Something has to give if we are because we probably aren't going to get much more money than we have now and the cost for fuel and salt and whatever other material that we end up using is only going to increase."

In some areas, communities are already re-evaluating which roads will be maintained with bare surfaces.

"Our roads are heavily populated in summer," said David Decker with the Lake George Watershed Conference. But in winter, he said, use of some routes "drops precipitously."

"We're still applying a clear roads salt policy in and around the [Lake George] basin for something like six cars per day," Decker said. "It doesn't make sense."

Some tourism officials worry that roads with packed snow surfaces would scare off visitors who are unfamiliar with driving in winter conditions.

It's also unclear whether locals — after decades of seeing blacktop year-round — will accept a return to the old tradition of snow tires, chains, and slower speeds.

But this is one area where environmental conservation and fiscal conservatism seem to overlap. If road salt use is unsustainable economically and also damaging our Park, maybe it's time to consider a new approach.

Your thoughts welcome.