

IT'S SNOWING!

Expectations Affect the Environment

By Nathan Helder



WITH EACH passing spring, if you are a resident of Ontario, you would have to be totally oblivious if you didn't notice dead yellow grass along sidewalks or dead trees along sides of roads, downwind of road spray from

passing vehicles. Since the environment is front and centre in the collective awareness of all of us Ontarians and we as horticulturalists/landscapers/snow contractors use the "environment" like a painter uses a canvas, it is incumbent on us to be good stewards of our environment.

■ The Black Asphalt Policy

Yet having said all this, over the last 10–15 years, many homeowners, building owners, organizations, and institutions have enforced snow contractors to maintain a curb to curb "black asphalt" policy during the winter months. What is a "black asphalt" policy? Baldly stated, it's maintaining the parking lot, sidewalks, and throughways snow and ice-free at all times – to minimize any slip and falls. Black asphalt is, however, not an environmentally responsible policy.

Excessive use of road salts can have harmful consequences on the surrounding environment. Salt is a corrosive material and may cause deterioration of roadway surfaces, concrete structures, vehicles, nearby grass, trees and other vegetation. In addition, dissolved salt in snowmelt eventually drains to water systems where elevated chloride levels can be toxic to fish and other aquatic life.

On the flip side, property owners of Southern Ontario must contend with snow and ice during the winter months and property owners usually make snow contractors assume liability for slip and falls in their contract. Snow and ice control is a key part of any winter snow clearing contractor's operation and the product of choice is



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rock salt. Road salts (mainly sodium chloride) are the preferred deicing/anti-icing chemicals for maintaining safe, passable parking and property access because of their low cost, effectiveness and ease of handling.

So what's next? How much salt should you use? Where should you use salt and more importantly, where should you limit your application of road salt? Should you be initiating a pilot anti-icing project to assess its viability on your roads? Should there be a salt management plan? Are there other anti-icing materials that are effective and environmentally friendly? Why do you care? To minimize the effect of salt on our environment, everyone in the community needs to work together and share the responsibility.

■ Shared Responsibility – Contractor

In January 2008, the Region of Waterloo launched the *Smart about Salt* program to encourage private snow removal contractors and their customers to reduce winter salt. This program's goal is to reduce

the amount of salt needed to make parking lots and sidewalks safe by following the Five R's of salt management: Use the *right* material, at the *right* time, in the *right* amount, in the *right* place and *retain* it long enough to do the job.

This is an education and certification program, whereby snow contractors and facility managers must keep intensive records and documentation, complete operational and site self-assessments and implement training, contractual and tracking best management practices. Whether your snow contractor is part of the Waterloo Region does not matter. The best management practices outlined in the *Smart about Salt* program should be followed by every snow contractor (www.region.waterloo.on.ca/smartaboutsalt).

Snow contractors should be tracking weather conditions 24/7; it is also essential to know when to apply salt. Local weather forecasts can help to anticipate whether or not snow is likely to accumulate to the point that slippery conditions will occur. The speed that the storm is moving



is also an important consideration.

Thorough documentation is critical to a snow contractor. Documentation should include location of site, date and time of treatment, weather conditions, plowing activities, type and quantity of material used, and observed risk areas that could not be treated and why they could not be treated. Having the customer sign-off on “winter site plans” indicating plow direction and deposit zones is crucial. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) provide building owners and contractors alike 3rd-party verification when equipment has been on-site. A successful

salt management strategy requires training of human personnel – safe snow plowing operations, safe material spreading, physical and mental conditioning, communications and equipment safety. It is important for snow contractors to review the available materials and technologies for snow and ice control.

■ **Shared Responsibility – Property Owner/Tenant/General Public**

The number one priority in winter is to have safe roads for school buses, transit and emergency service vehicles. Other priorities include minimizing economic loss in the community and reducing the inconvenience to the public during winter precipitation.

Property owners typically determine how contracts are developed. The following should be considered when developing snow and ice control contracts: contracts should encourage mechanical removal thereby reducing the amount of salt needed to maintain safe and passable conditions, service areas and application

rates should be established, snow contractors and property owners both share in the liability in event of a slip and fall.

Further questions should be asked. Do we respect the weather? Do we sometimes take unnecessary chances with driving? What are our expectations? Should our expectations be lowered? Do we want “black asphalt” at all times? Why is the “black asphalt” policy only found in the Golden Horseshoe area? What type of footwear are we wearing outside when it’s freezing rain or blowing snow? Should we assume some liability and reduce the number of slip and fall claims? How can we prevent rising insurance premiums for snow contractors? Are we patient enough when snow is falling during rush hour times?

■ **Conclusion**

These questions might seem obvious to you. However, if the environment is as important to us in the summer, why does it seem to be less important in the winter? Yet, over 5 million tonnes of road salt is used in

Canada annually. If property owners and the general public do not start to assume any liability and be responsible for their actions during the winter season, snow contractors will be forced to apply more ice melting products (salt) to make each sidewalk, driveway and parking areas ice and snow free. When there is a slip and fall claim, the Ontario Court system and insurance companies must recognize that shared responsibilities exist, otherwise snow contractors will continue to apply enough salt to maintain “black asphalt.”

Salt, when following the 5 R’s, is an important tool in maintaining safe conditions. Snow contractors, insurance companies, property owners and the general public must work together to ensure that safe conditions exist without compromising the environment. ■

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