

# POURING ON THE SALT INCREASES FISCAL PAIN

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When a purchasing cooperative for area communities sought bids last spring for road salt, the outcome was unusual the group rejected all five contract proposals.

Survey tracks how much area communities spent on road salt last year. Page 13 "They were too high," said Lara Thomas, regional administrator of the Southeastern Regional Services Group. "They ranged from \$42.47 a ton to \$68 a ton."

The cooperative learned early about what many local highway supervisors say they still can't get used to the steep hike in the price of road salt this year. Local officials say they have seen price increases ranging from \$10 to \$20 per ton, which could result in large road budget deficits if the winter is severe.

Public works officials are looking for new ways to save money. East Bridgewater, for instance, is among at least 25 municipalities in the state that plan to use a Hungarian-inspired salt mix called **Magic Salt**, which is rock salt treated with a syrupy solution that helps it stick to the pavement better and last longer than untreated salt. The idea is that less salt would be needed, resulting in savings, said John Haines, East Bridgewater's highway surveyor.

"I haven't used it yet. But because of the increased cost of salt, you'll see people looking at different alternatives, and you experiment," said Haines, who is paying \$41.66 per ton for road salt this year, versus last year's \$32.

But most communities in the area will face winter with regular road salt, and try to deal with the unexpected jump in their cost of keeping local roads clear of snow and ice.

Last winter, Stoughton officials paid about \$29 a ton; this winter, it's \$41 a ton, said Larry Barrett, the town's public works superintendent. Stoughton used 3,449 tons of salt last winter, at a cost of \$102,867. The same amount would cost \$41,000 more this winter.

Rob Zora, Marion's Department of Public Works superintendent, said that when he saw his price for salt had jumped from \$34.13 a ton to \$53.42 a ton, "I got sticker shock."

But, Zora said, "it is what it is, and we are committed because we need the salt."

Fortunately for him, Marion has relatively few miles of road to salt compared with other towns. The town used 175 tons of salt last year, spending \$5,972. Big municipalities like Brockton that have hundreds of miles of major travel arteries are harder hit by the price hike. Last winter, Brockton used 10,000 tons of salt and spent \$375,000, according to David Bloodsworth, the mayor's spokesman.

No one is calling for increases in snow removal budgets, which are traditionally set lower than actual spending. By state law, the snow removal budget is the only one that municipalities can allow to operate in a deficit. Town officials are allowed to roll over the deficit into the next fiscal year, and subtract it from revenues.

At the state level, legislators this year appropriated \$35 million for snow removal instead of the usual \$15 million. Massachusetts Highway Department officials had been pushing to increase its snow and ice allocation because the budget always exceeds the \$15 million, said Jon Carlisle, a MassHighway spokesman. The five-year average for snow and ice spending is about \$56 million a year, he said.

MassHighway takes care of all state and interstate roads. This winter, MassHighway officials are paying \$34.60 a ton for salt, which is about \$10 a ton more than last year's price, according to Judith Forman, a MassHighway spokeswoman.

The reason for the escalating salt prices is partly due to the development boom taking place in China and India, according to industry experts and salt suppliers.

"You can't pick up the paper without reading [about] the growth rate of China and India," said Bill Creighton, general manager of Granite State Minerals, a salt supplier in Portsmouth, N.H. "For these countries to feed their growth rate, they are buying up everything in the world, from salt to steel to cement. The demand for these items has outstripped the supply."

Higher transportation costs also have contributed to the prices, said Richard I. Hanneman, president of the Salt Institute, a nonprofit association of salt producers based in Alexandria, Va. Many salt mines are located outside the United States the bulk of them in South America and the demand for ocean shipping has pushed up the cost of moving freight. Also, higher fuel costs have increased trucking prices, he said.

"It's always been [this way] with salt the majority of the cost is transportation," said Creighton.

Although the salt prices have jumped, Zora and other highway superintendents in the region say they can't change their approach to salting roadways.

"The priority is to get the roads safe. Money comes second," said Barrett. "No one jumps up and says, 'Great, you saved us money on snow.' They'll jump up if the roads aren't safe."

Harry Sylvester, Hingham's Department of Public Works superintendent, agrees: "If you don't salt, you're setting up for disaster, and then car insurance [premiums] would go up."

Even if highway officials tried to scrimp on salt usage, they would have to use more sand to compensate and end up not saving money, said Sylvester. And using more sand would pose another financial problem, because the sand has to be swept up and disposed of in the spring. Appropriate disposal costs money.

In Plymouth, public works director George Crombie said he is focusing on better management of salt and sand usage for environmental as well as economic reasons this year. All of the town's spreaders are being fitted with automated calibrators that determine the amount of sand and salt to use on roads, instead of leaving it up to the operators to handle manually, he said.

Paying closer attention to the variables that go into salt and sand usage, such as weather forecasts, is also important, he said.

"We're trying to cut our [salt] usage this year by 10 percent. That's worth about \$55,000. But, managing salt and sand doesn't mean compromising safety," he said.