Description

For obvious safety reasons, snow removal in Colorado is important; however, snow removal and management practices can adversely impact vegetation, soils, water quality, and air quality. Snow removal contractors and operators should be knowledgeable of these potential impacts and choose management measures with the fewest adverse impacts, while still protecting the public safety, health and welfare.

Photograph SIM-1. Snow storage locations should be clearly communicated to snow removal contractors and located where they can drain to stormwater BMPs or landscaped areas. Photo courtesy of WWE.

Appropriate Uses

Snow and ice management procedures are relevant for homeowners, contractors, business owners, and transportation departments.

Practice Guidelines[1]

- Physical removal of snow and ice by shovels, snowplows, or snow blowers usually has the least water quality and landscape impacts, provided that storage areas are not piled directly on landscape plants or drained directly to receiving waters. Plan for snow storage locations that minimize water quality and landscape impacts prior to winter.
- Ensure that equipment is calibrated to optimum levels according to manufacturer's instructions.
- Consider placing barriers in targeted site-specific locations (i.e., along streams or direct drainages) to route deicing material away from waterbodies.
- Reduce plowing speed in sensitive areas to prevent exposure to deicing material.
- Designate snow storage areas in locations that enable runoff to be directed to stormwater BMPs for treatment, when practicable.
- The use of deicing chemicals can have a severe impact on plants growing near roads and sidewalks. This can become a water quality issue when plants die and erosion results. Many deicing chemicals are salts and can adversely affect plants through either direct contact with foliage or through buildup in the soil over time. Representative impacts include:

[1]These practice guidelines have been adapted from the *GreenCO Best Management Practices for the Conservation and Protection of Water Quality in Colorado: Moving Toward Sustainability* (GreenCO and WWE 2008). See this manual for additional detail and references.

- Direct contact often occurs when the deicing chemicals accumulate on the plants due to drift during application, or when snow or ice containing the chemical is shoveled or blown onto nearby plants. Because these chemicals are salts, direct contact with the foliage may result in burning due to a rapid dehydration effect.

- Buildup of de-icing chemicals in the soil may have even more detrimental effects. Repeated application over time (either during a particular winter season or over many seasons) may damage plants by making their roots unable to take up water. Symptoms will include wilting even when the soil is moist, leaf burn or needle tip burn, stunting or lack of vigor, and/or deficiency symptoms for one or more plant nutrients. The structure of clay soils can be changed to the point that they are unable to support plant life.

- Deicing chemicals that are considered safer to use around plants include calcium magnesium acetate (CMA) or calcium chloride. As with all chemicals used in the landscape, be sure to read and follow label instructions and do not over apply.

- The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) has conducted multiple studies on deicing chemicals. The SeaCrest Group (2001) studied three groups of deicers for CDOT that were chloride-based, acetate-based, and sanding materials. The chloride-based deicers included magnesium chloride (FreezGard Zero® with Shield LS®, Ice-Stop™ CI, Caliber™ M1000, Ice Ban™ M50), calcium chloride (Liquidow®, Armor®), and sodium chloride (road salt and Ice Slicer®). The acetate-based deicers include Calcium Magnesium Acetate (CMA®), Potassium Acetate (CF7®), Sodium Acetate (NAAC®), and CMAK™ (a mixture of CMA and Potassium Acetate). Table 1 contains a partial summary of the study findings.

- Highlights of the SeaCrest (2001) study regarding impacts associated with the three categories include:

  - The chloride-based deicers have been shown to have adverse effects on terrestrial vegetation. Damage to vegetation from deicing salts has been reported to a distance of 100-650 feet. However, there is a wide range of tolerance of different species of plants to the effects of chlorides. The chloride ions in deicers increase the salinity of the soil near the roadways where they are applied. The magnesium and calcium ions increase the stability and permeability of the soil, whereas sodium ions decrease soil stability and permeability.

  - The acetate-based deicers are organic and have different kinds of effects on the environment than the chloride-based deicers. The acetate ions are broken down by soil microorganisms and may result in oxygen depletion of the soil, which can impact vegetation; however, the acetate deicers CMA and Potassium Acetate (CMAK) are not harmful to terrestrial vegetation at the concentrations typically used on roadways. However, NAAC may potentially have an adverse effect on vegetation because of the presence of the sodium ion, which decreases the stability and permeability of the soil. The depletion of oxygen in the soil from the breakdown of the acetate ion can have a negative effect on plant growth, but field evidence of this effect is limited.

  - Sand is not a deicer, but is used for snow and ice control because it improves traction. Sand has a negative effect on water quality as a result of the increased turbidity caused by the presence of sand particles in water. Excessive quantities of sand can smother vegetation.

Table SIM-1. Potential Environmental Impacts of Various Deicers
(Source: The SeaCrest Group 2001)[2]

Deicer/ Parameter	Inhibited Magnesium Chloride (Liquid)	Caliber + Magnesium Chloride (Liquid)	Ice Ban + Magnesium Chloride (Liquid)	Sodium Chloride/ Ice Slicer (Solid)	Inhibited Calcium Chloride (Liquid)	CMA (Solid/ Liquid)	CMAK (Liquid)	Potassium Acetate (Liquid)	NAAC (Solid)	Sand
Chemicals	Trace metals	Trace metals, phosphorus, ammonia	Trace metals, phosphorus, ammonia, nitrates	Trace metals	Trace metals, ammonia, nitrates.	Trace metals	Trace metals, ammonia, nitrates.	Trace metals	Trace metals, phosphorus	Trace metals
Soil	Improves structure, increases salinity	Improves structure, increases salinity, oxygen depletion	Improves structure, increases salinity, oxygen depletion	Increases salinity; decreases stability	Improves structure, increases salinity	Improves structure; oxygen depletion	Improves structure; oxygen depletion	Improves structure; oxygen depletion	Decreases stability; oxygen depletion	Minimal effects
Water Quality	Increases salinity	Increases salinity; oxygen depletion	Increases salinity; oxygen depletion	Increases salinity	Increases salinity		Oxygen depletion	Oxygen depletion	Oxygen depletion	Increases turbidity
Air Quality	Minimal air pollution	Minimal air pollution	Minimal air pollution	Some air pollution	Minimal air pollution	Minimal air pollution	Minimal air pollution	Minimal air pollution	Some air pollution	High air pollution potential
Aquatic Organisms	Relatively low toxicity	Relatively low toxicity	Moderate toxicity	Relatively low toxicity	Relatively low toxicity	Relatively low toxicity	Moderate toxicity	Moderate toxicity	Relatively low toxicity	Can cover benthic organisms and cause mortality
Terrestrial Vegetation	Chlorides damage vegetation	Chlorides damage vegetation	Chlorides damage vegetation	Chlorides damage vegetation	Chlorides damage vegetation	Minimal damage to vegetation	Minimal damage to vegetation	Minimal damage to vegetation	Effects to vegetation not determined	Can cover vegetation and cause mortality
Terrestrial Animals	Does not attract wildlife	Does not attract wildlife	Does not attract wildlife	Attracts wildlife contributing to road kills	Does not attract wildlife	Not expected to attract wildlife	Not expected to attract wildlife	Not expected to attract wildlife	May attract wildlife contributing to roadkills	May cover burrows of small animals and cause mortality

Note: Trace metals that may be present include arsenic, barium, cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, mercury, selenium, and zinc. Soil comments related to structure refer to the affect on soil stability, which relates to erosion. See http://www.coloradodot.info/programs/research/pdfs/2001/deicers.pdf/view for more information.

- Where practicable, do not use deicers to melt snow or ice completely, but to make their removal easier. Deicers melt down through the ice or snow to the hard surface, then spread out underneath. This undercuts and loosens the snow so shoveling and plowing can be done. For this reason, it is helpful to apply deicers prior to snow events in some cases.

- Research has shown that the shape of deicing particles affects the speed of their penetration through ice. Uniformly shaped spherical pellets of about 1/16 inch to 3/16 inch penetrate ice faster and more efficiently than other shapes.

- Try to avoid the use of rock salt since it is generally most damaging to plants, soils and concrete and metal surfaces. In areas where deicing salts are unavoidable, select plants with higher salt tolerances.

[2] The SeaCrest Group, 2001. *Evaluation of Selected Deicers Based on a Review of the Literature,* Report No. CDOT-DTD-2001-15. Prepared for Colorado Department of Transportation Research Branch.

- Do not plow snow directly into streams or wetlands. Snow storage and disposal areas should be located in an area where snowmelt can infiltrate into the ground, filter through a vegetated buffer or be otherwise treated prior to reaching streams and wetlands. Provide adequate storage volume to trap sediment left behind by melting snow and plan regular maintenance to remove accumulated sediment.

- In areas subject to heavy chemical deicing use, flushing the soil with water after the last freeze may alleviate burn potential. Year-round proper plant care will also make plants more tolerant to salt exposure. However, for the overall health of the landscape, the goal should be to reduce or minimize the use of deicing chemicals where they are not necessary for safety reasons.

- If an electric/mechanical snow melting device is used to dispose of removed snow (e.g., The Can snow melter, Snow Dragon, etc.), the owner or operator must obtain the appropriate permit prior to discharge. Snowmelt from melting machines is typically considered process wastewater.