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A call for task force on road salt

By MIKE LYNCH, Enterprise Outdoors Writer

PAUL SMITHS - The governor's office should create a special task force to study road salt and winter road maintenance in the Adirondacks. That was the consensus of a collection of organizations that gathered Monday at Paul Smith's College to discuss the negative impacts of road salt.

The organizations plan to ask the Common Ground Alliance to take up their cause at its annual meeting in Long Lake on July 14 and have that group formally request the task force.

Monday's conference was attended by about 40 people and included representatives from the state Adirondack Park Agency, state Department of Transportation, town and county highway departments, lake associations and environmental organizations, among others. The conference was organized by the Adirondack Council and ADKAction.org, an Adirondack political action committee.

Conference moderator Lee Keet said there are two reasons he believes this conference will result in improved winter maintenance methods.

"We have a much more representative group of people here than I have ever seen assembled on this before and have collectively a lot more political influence than we've ever assembled," Keet said. "Secondly, we now have a problem that we can define."

The conference comes on the heels of a the second report on the impacts of road salt in two years. The first, "Low Sodium Diet," was put together by the Adirondack Council in 2009. The second report, "Review of Effects and Costs of Road De-icing with Recommendations for Winter Road Management in the Adirondack Park" was prepared by Daniel L. Kelting, executive director of Paul Smith's College's Adirondack Watershed Institute. The report was published in February and underwritten and distributed by adkaction.org.

Both reports, relying on existing data, found that the amount of salt applied to Adirondack roads has harmed ecosystems and drinking water sources. But the detriment people notice most is that road salt accelerates rusting in automobiles.

In one section, Kelting compared lakes and ponds studied by the Adirondack Lakes Assessment Program and those looked at by the Adirondack Lakes Survey Corporation. ALAP studied 114 lakes and ponds, including many near roads. The other study looked at 54 ponds and lakes, all located away from roads.

The data showed that backcountry water bodies had very little sodium content while lakes near roads had considerably higher amounts. The saltiest four lakes in the Park in order are Lower

Cascade Lake, Lake Colby, Lake Tekeni and Upper Cascade Lake. Kelting's study states that the average amount of chloride found by the ALAP study was 22 times higher than that found in the backcountry water bodies studied by ALSC.

At the conference, several DOT representatives were on hand and appeared willing to work with the organizations to reduce the impact on the environment while noting that public safety can't be compromised.

Elizabeth Kolb, DOT's special assistant for environmental concerns, said the number-one priority is "to make sure we aren't going to have accidents."

DOT representatives gave several presentations that indicated reducing the use of road salt is something they have already been pursuing in recent years. One presentation noted that the DOT used 197 tons per lane mile in the winter of 2007-08 but only 148 tons this past winter. Those totals are influenced by both application procedures and weather conditions.

Still, Robert Selover, a director in DOT's Office of Transportation Maintenance, said the timing for improving winter road maintenance could be good for political reasons.

"This may be time because this all falls under the umbrella of sustainability, and the environment is a large part of sustainability," Selover said. "And that is something that is getting more play on the national scene, and it's certainly starting to get more play on the statewide scene, and sustainability takes in these other types of costs. So maybe the time is right."