

WNBZ
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Study shows risk posed by excessive use of road salt

A study released in February highlights the risks associated with the excessive use of road salt.

The study was conducted by the Paul Smith's College-based Adirondack Watershed Institute and funded by ADK Action. It's the third such report released in the last year that calls for changes in the way ice and snow is managed along highways.

Daniel Kelting is executive director of the Adirondack Watershed Institute. He says excessive salt use results in significant damage to both natural and man-made environments.

"We think the water, plants and wildlife of the Adirondack Park deserve special treatment from roads crews to protect them from harm," Kelting said, noting that salt also damages roads, bridges, vehicles and buildings.

One of the study's recommendations is the creation of a "salt sensitivity map." The map would visualize specific areas where drinking water, plant-life and animal habitats are at a particular risk.

"Creating an official salt-sensitivity map is the logical first step toward better protections," Kelting said.

Two previous studies were commissioned by the Adirondack Council and the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center at the University of Maine.

Lee Keet is chair of the water quality committee for ADK Action. He says his group will work with various organizations and state agencies to support the salt-sensitivity map.

"It's our hope that there will be a salt-sensitivity map for the whole state one day," he said. "This is the right place to start."

The watershed institute report contains research showing the negative effects that chlorine and sodium contamination have on water quality. The report details some of the alternatives to road salt are being employed in many areas.

Brian Houseal is executive director of the Adirondack Council. He notes it's important to be realistic about road salt.

"We cannot just stop using road salt tomorrow," he said. "But we need to start protecting our most sensitive places now."

The state Department of Transportation is already proposing to reduce its salt usage as a means to save costs. Part of the DOT's 2010-11 budget calls for careful monitoring of the quantity of

salt used by drivers. It's estimated that a significant reduction in salt-usage could save the state millions of dollars.

“While many of these alternatives may cost more upfront, they can mitigate many of the long term environmental and infrastructure costs that we face with continued overuse of salt,” Houseal said.

The University of Maine study recommends investing in porous asphalt that allows de-icing chemicals to soak through to collection pools underneath road surfaces to prevent runoff.

In addition to the environmental impact of road salt, the material also causes significant harm to motor vehicles.

The full study can be viewed at adk-action.org

-Chris Morris, 3-5-10