

How we should approach road salt

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By Guest Contributor

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By Phill Sexton

Let's give road salt a new identity, a new purpose of conservation, innovation and responsibility.

Salt is an Environmental Protection Agency-designated pollutant that we are allowed to apply unregulated. Unnecessary and copious applications of salt (and sand) on surfaces we walk and drive on has progressively increased for decades—an epidemic that is getting worse.

Slip and fall claims and vehicle accidents are framed as the primary reason for oversalting. Liability is a legitimate concern based on my experience as a contractor forced by insurance companies to settle out of court for bogus claims. But we must stop expecting roads and surfaces to be slip-free, which is unachievable.

Solutions for reducing road salt use will be achieved through awareness – education and outreach campaigns – and at an operational level by following sustainable winter management standards. These are monumental outcomes given society's current appetite for immediate gratification and their right to drive and go wherever they want, whenever they want.

Sand is not an option. It absorbs moisture and freezes. Sand does provide friction – until it doesn't. Mixing sand with snow eventually creates hardpack. Freezing rain is usually the only reason sand may be more effective than waste salt that will dilute with the rain. Otherwise, sand mixes with snow and ice, absorbs the moisture, and further enables the hardpack conditions we are trying to prevent or remove.

The [Adirondack Road Salt Reduction Task Force Assessment and Recommendations report](#) confirms the negative impact of road salt on aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, human health and property. The report recommends standards of practice, and pilots that are realistic and actionable.



I say with 100% confidence that the recommendations in the report will work because for the past decade a team of advisers and I have helped dozens of organizations to follow Sustainable Winter Management (SWiM) standards that have helped reduce salt use by 50% or more, and nearly eliminate the use of sand. SWiM standards are the framework of Best Management Practices recommended in the task force report.

This comprehensive report can serve as the roadmap for reducing road salt throughout the Adirondack Park and statewide, when enabled by accountability, action, and funding. Gov. Kathy Hochul should establish an interagency council with a strong leader dedicated to guiding the implementation of the task force's recommendations.



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The state also needs a chloride water quality standard. Bare minimum, begin with the EPA's national recommended water quality criteria (which is still too high). New York, normally the leader, is behind on this issue. Several New England and Northeast states, as far south as Virginia, have established total maximum daily standards for chlorides, or are currently working on them. Why doesn't New York?

New York also needs an action plan to implement recommendations over the next seven years, starting with a pilot program this season as the new council plans incremental salt use reductions statewide from 2026 to 2030.

A percentage of the state's salt budget can be reallocated to help fund the council's initiatives, rather than through new funding. Proof already exists throughout the Lake George region, the North Country and other parts of the Northeast, where SWiM standards

have been followed for years resulting in substantial savings. Several counties and towns are already successfully reallocating their annual budgets to reinvest in training, new methods and new technologies. State government has the same opportunity.

The environmental bond act offers another source of funding. These water quality dollars should be focused on awarding grants to qualified municipalities and contractors for equipment and infrastructure upgrades that are known to reduce road salt applications.

Salt suppliers should be required to be part of the solution. If this pollutant is allowed to be sold and distributed at the very generous profits afforded the salt supply chain, which are further enabled by the state's "Buy American Salt Act," then there should be a fee charged on salt sold in New York to be distributed to a salt reduction fund overseen by the new council. Salt suppliers will not be hurt by this. They already control prices.

Road salt pollution is deeply embedded in human behavior, therefore will be solved when we focus on the culture of salt use. Reducing our road salt pollution by more than 50% is already proven to be easily achievable with commitment and accountability. The model exists. We simply need to scale these efforts. We need to want to solve what has already been proven can be solved.

Phill Sexton, a snow and ice management consultant for 35 years and a member of the Adirondack Salt Reduction Task Force, lives in Schenectady County.

Photo A state highway truck dumps road salt in Tupper Lake. Photo by Mike Lynch

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