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## DOT, UMaine assess road maintenance



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KATE COLLINS

Crews from Brewer's Public Works Department work on removing snow from Washington Street on Tuesday. [Buy Photo](#)

[By Nok-Noi Ricker](#)

BDN Staff

ORONO, Maine — Maine Department of Transportation officials want to know if techniques they are using now to keep the state's roads clear during the winter are working and if they are hurting the environment. They have enlisted the help of the University of Maine to answer their questions.

"We were asked a few years ago by our executive staff to take a look at our road salt [usage] to try to determine if we're going down the right path," Dale Peabody, director of MDOT's research division, said on Tuesday.

MDOT officials have asked the University of Maine's Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center to do a comprehensive and independent review of the state's current winter road maintenance measures.

Researchers at UMaine's Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Environmental and Watershed Research will look into the environmental impacts of salt and chemicals used on roadways for the project. Other departments will examine such issues as road safety and the effectiveness of the various materials and methods used to keep roads clear.

The MDOT maintains roads all over the state, which includes fixing them and keeping them clear during the winter with plowing, salting and sanding.

"Maine spends \$23 million on winter road maintenance and snow and ice removal [each year]," Professor Jonathan Rubin of the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center and School of Economics said in a press release.

Herb Thompson, MDOT spokesman, said the department uses a triangle of considerations that balances costs, safety and environmental impacts, when making decisions about how to maintain the state's many roadways.

An advisory committee, which includes university professors, environmental groups, legislators, personnel from the Maine Motor Transport Association, members of law enforcement, fire and rescue

departments, and other stakeholders, already has formed to work on the project. The group's first meeting was scheduled for last week and was postponed because of a winter storm, Peabody said.

The committee will do a risk-analysis, and "we'll look at tradeoffs ... to try to [balance] service with impacts to the infrastructure and environmental issues," he said.

In the spring, public outreach meetings will be held to give the public input on road maintenance.

Professor Per Garder of the University of Maine Civil and Environmental Engineering department also will contribute to the study by providing an analysis of road safety, comparing new types of winter maintenance and snow and ice removal to what was done years ago.

For example, in the 1930s, roads simply were closed until the snow went away, Garder said in the press release. Then crews began plowing, and as the technology improved, the roads became clearer and driving speeds increased. Then salt was mixed with sand to increase tire traction.

"Then more and more salt was used until a few years ago when they started using anti-icing chemicals to coat the roads before storms," he said. "It prevents snow and ice from sticking to the road. We have clear, dry roads immediately, as opposed to letting it stick to the road and plowing."

How long those chemicals and road salt can be used to maintain safe roads before the environment suffers are driving questions, Peabody said.

"Can we sustain this application for snow and ice removal and be stewards of the environment?" he said. "And are we doing the most cost-effective thing?"

The report is expected to be finished next year, when it will be presented to the Maine Legislature.

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