

Salt Your Margaritas – Not Our Fresh Water

When walking and driving get tricky due to slippery winter pavement, we turn to a tried and true method for preventing falls and improving conditions. There are many names for it – road salt, sidewalk salt, snow/ice melt, and deicing chemicals. It is readily available and relatively cheap. These chloride-based products have been a part of Wisconsin life for as long as anyone can remember. The sound it makes as it crunches under our feet imparts a feeling of security.

Not much thought has been given to its application. As society has grown increasingly litigious, the “more is better” approach has prevailed. And those directions on the back of the bag – who needs them? Just open and apply liberally and often regardless of the weather. The crystals disappear as snow and ice melt and they are gone from our collective conscious.

The crystals did not just disappear. Storm water run-off carried them in solution to the nearest body of water. This salty water descends to the lower depths of ponds and lakes - because it is heavier than fresh water - where it remains, resulting in highly degraded and detrimental conditions for the aquatic community of plants and animals. The more deicing chemicals we use every season, the worse the conditions become. The cost to desalinate water polluted with chlorides is astronomical.

Here’s the good news. Everyone one of us can decrease the toxic effects of deicing chemicals on storm water run-off with a few simple changes in our practice. The beauty of it is that even with these necessary changes, safety is maintained, and our precious watershed is protected.

- First, read the directions on the bag. Not all snow/ice products are created equally. For example, if it is composed of sodium chloride, it will not work when the temperature is below 15 degrees Fahrenheit. All brands have directions for application based on the composition of the product.
- Shovel early and often. This prevents compaction and refreezing and decreases the amount of salt used.
- Believe it or not, 12 ounces of deicer is plenty to treat an entire 20-foot driveway or 10 sidewalk squares. There should be about 3 inches between the salt crystals.
- Put ice cleats on your shoes and boots.
- Remember, if you want better traction, deicing chemicals are not your best choice. Sand, sawdust, or birdseed are good choices for improved traction on slippery surfaces.
- Apply anti-icing chemicals like various brines and magnesium chloride before snow and ice form – not after.
- If you use contractors for chloride application, ask if they have completed training on the current best practices. Hire those who have.

Root-Pike Watershed Initiative Network has sponsored workshops for the municipalities we serve to support their efforts on behalf of salt reduction. They are working hard to keep people safe and protect water quality.

Becoming aware of the environmental impact of deicing chemicals is the first step toward reducing their impact on fresh water. Before you apply those chemicals, remember that approximately one teaspoon

of salt is enough to contaminate 5 gallons of fresh water. Using salt wisely and maintaining safety is a WIN-WIN combination. F

For more information go to <https://www.wisaltwise.com/>. Or, contact Root-Pike Watershed Initiative Network at 262-681-4899 or nan@rootpikewin.org