The impact of deicers in the environment

Todd V. Royer
Two sides to every issue…

Public Safety

Environmental Impact
Two broad categories:

1. Changes in the chemical environment
   - transient
   - permanent or long-term

2. Toxic effects on organisms
   - acute toxicity
   - chronic toxicity (may be sublethal)
Concern about deicers is not new

Numerous publications in the 1960s - 1970s documented increased salinity in surface waters related to road salting.

Most early studies were focused on urban areas, particularly in the northeastern US and southeastern Canada.

Most described chemical conditions, but some examined toxicity or other ecological impacts.
Concern that bog vegetation was disappearing

“Diverted highway runoff was shown to be the major continuing source of sodium chloride contamination…”
“…freshwater organisms and their uses should not be affected unacceptably if the four-day average concentration of dissolved chloride, when associated with sodium, does not exceed 230 mg/L more than once every three years on the average”

“…if the one-hour average does not exceed 860 mg/L more than once every three years on the average”
Toxicity is dependent on many factors

What species?

What life stage?

Interactions with other stressors? (temperature, food quality, etc.)

In the case of road salt, the chemical form of the salt is very important and EPA recognized this:

“This criterion probably will not be adequately protective when the chloride is associated with potassium, calcium, or magnesium, rather than sodium.”

The Code is designed to help municipalities and other road authorities better manage their use of road salts in a way that reduces harm they cause to the environment while maintaining road safety.

Requires development of a management plan, tracking and reporting of salt use, and other activities.
Road salt enters aquatic ecosystems as a non-point source

Weather dependent

Multiple sources (private, municipal)

The input is spatially and temporally variable

The input is unregulated

In this respect, it is much like fertilizer runoff
“…freshwater organisms and their uses should not be affected unacceptably if the **four-day average** concentration of dissolved chloride, when associated with sodium, does not exceed 230 mg/L more than once every three years on the average”

“…if the **one-hour average** does not exceed 860 mg/L more than once every three years on the average”

Few monitoring programs are designed to capture the one-hour average or even the four-day average

How many samples are needed to calculate the average?

To do this well involves storm-chasing, automated samplers, and a lot late night and early morning sampling in unfavorable weather
A Fresh Look at Road Salt: Aquatic Toxicity and Water-Quality Impacts on Local, Regional, and National Scales

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decade since then, with more comprehensive evidence of water-quality impacts from road salt. A small sampling of some representative topics studied includes specific water-quality impacts such as increased chloride and sodium concentrations, seasonality, climatic and land-use influence, vertical density gradients, and influence on sediment pore water, mixing and alteration of turnover in lakes (2–5), and aquatic toxicity impacts (2, 6, 7). Second, road salt usage in the United States has increased steadily beginning in the 1940s through the current decade (8, 9). Average annual salt sales in the United States for deicing purposes by decade beginning in 1940 were 0.28 (1940s), 1.1 (1950s), 4.1 (1960s), 8.7 (1970s), 8.8 (1980s), 13.0 (1990s), and 16.0 (2000–2008) million metric tons per year. Third, urban development is increasing each year (10), which increases the amount of impervious area on which winter deicing operations are conducted. This collective information suggests that the increasing road-salt usage trends of the previous seven decades will likely continue under current management
FIGURE 7. Comparison of chloride concentrations to chronic (A) and acute (B) USEPA water-quality criteria for warm-weather months and cold-weather months in streams from northern and southern urban areas. Bars indicate the percent of sites for each metropolitan area that had at least one sample result greater than the water-quality criteria.

Does not consider the time component in the criteria
Road Salt Application in the U.S.

Ellettsville, Indiana

More miles of roads (suburban and exurban development)

More pre-treatment (a proactive approach rather than reactive)
A Fresh Look at Road Salt: Aquatic Toxicity and Water-Quality Impacts on Local, Regional, and National Scales

Second wave of interest in the effects of road salt
Increased salinization of fresh water in the northeastern United States


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Contributed by Gene E. Likens, August 4, 2005
Increased salinization of fresh water in the northeastern United States

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Contributed by Gene E. Likens, August 4, 2005
Effect of Road Salt Application on Seasonal Chloride Concentrations and Toxicity in South-Central Indiana Streams

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Figure 4. Map of study sampling points (circles) within 14-digit Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC) boundaries (grey areas) and streams (blue) (Indiana Geological Survey, 2004).

Funded in part by the Monroe County Drainage Board
Winter Cl⁻ concentrations (December through March)

Total Developed Area (%):  5.1  14.6  16.1  17.3  78.5

Road Density (km/km²):  2.1  5.0  4.3  4.8  10.9
Stream health is a result of many factors

Road salt and other deicers can contribute to impaired conditions, but rarely as the sole cause. Other common contributors include:

- Nutrient loading
- Invasive species
- Altered hydrologic patterns and flow regulation
- Sedimentation
- Thermal pollution
- Loss of riparian vegetation
- Other toxic pollutants

“urban stream syndrome” as described by Meyer et al. (2005)*

Commercial deicers often contain various additives
Coloring agents are generally environmentally benign.

Anti-caking agents could increase toxicity of deicers.

Common anti-caking agents include:

- Sodium cyanide, $\text{NaCN}$
- Sodium ferrocyanide, $\text{Na}_4[\text{Fe(CN)}_6]$.

Toxicity due to the CN in anti-caking agents does not appear to be a major problem.

CN is complexed with the iron (can photodegrade to free CN).

Free CN is quickly diluted; also volatile and lost to the atmosphere.
Toxicity of deicers is variable and dependent on many factors.

Water quality criteria exist, but their application is challenging.

Urbanization (road density), public expectations, and management practices (pre-treatment) are driving increased application of deicers.

Isolating the ecological effects of deicers is difficult due to interacting factors.

It may be time, as a nation, to revisit the water quality criteria.
Fate and Transport
Where does the salt go?

In the case of streams and rivers, it may be transported some distance.

Accumulation in soils

Accumulation in groundwater

Accumulation in lakes
Ectogenic (anthropogenic) Meromixis

**Meromictic lakes** have a saline layer of water at the bottom that does not mix during spring or fall turnover.

**Holomictic lakes** – entire water body circulates during turnover.
Saline water is more dense than freshwater. This can have significant consequences for the ecological structure and function of a lake. It is also a concern if the lake serves as a drinking water supply.
From icy roads to salty streams

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Where Is the Sodium?
The current study focused on the fate of Cl, providing clear evidence of its link to road salt and build-up in streams. Two unanswered questions are (i) how the road salt gets into the streams and (ii) what happens to the accompanying sodium (Na). Na is important for its
Fig. 4. Precipitation and discharge (lower graph) at Site 4 during a winter storm in December 2008. Upper graph shows the corresponding concentrations of Na⁺, Cl⁻, and Ca²⁺. Inset shows the molar concentrations of Na⁺ and Cl⁻ in Site 4 during the storm event.
The sodium and chloride behaved identically; the sodium was not retained within the soils.

We concluded that storm drains were the transport mechanism, rather than overland or subsurface flow.
Questions or Comments?