

## WEB EXCLUSIVE: Planning For Next Winter




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By **David Morillo**

The severe rigors of Winter 2013-14 will not soon be forgotten. It has brought with it heavy and recurring snow storms across the United States, long stretches of harsh subzero temperatures, and a highly publicized, nationwide rock salt shortage. By February 2014, both the public and private sectors alike were scrambling to secure much needed rock salt supplies in order to keep roads and commercial facilities open. In many regions, municipalities and the private sector were forced to mix in sand to extend rock salt supplies as well as search for possible alternatives. The end of the winter found many municipalities and local governments searching for alternatives, with New Jersey using pickle juice and Wisconsin spreading cheese brine along its snow covered streets. ❌

For the private sector, this winter was an unrelenting assault that has had a dramatic impact on operating budgets and maintenance spending for facilities managers. As the public sector grabbed up the remaining rock salt, the private sector was left paying dramatically inflated prices, reaching as much as \$250 per ton, in contrast to the normal price of \$65 to \$95 per ton.

But it was not just the rise in salt prices that has caused significant budget concerns. Winter 2013-14 has brought cost increases across the board. The harsh and prolonged weather necessitated more labor and overtime work; the subzero temperatures slowed work progress; and the volume of snowfall required heavier and more costly equipment and fuel. This has led to never before seen cost implications for facility managers, who must now strive to significantly reduce the massive impact on their budgets. When planning for next winter, facility managers must begin to develop a proactive and systematic communications strategy as well as a comprehensive contingency and logistical plan.

Facility managers must devise and implement a robust communications system that provides occupants and other stakeholders with comprehensive and necessary information in a timely fashion. Such a system should be standardized and tested, with clear procedures and protocols for communication that must be followed at every stage of a storm. Appropriate reports and records must be kept to ensure that the system is being consistently used by all relevant persons. An effective system will reduce uncertainty and stress while providing confidence that the same level of communication will be maintained in an emergency situation or severe weather event. 

A successful communications strategy must contain standard measures for proactive reporting. Facility managers must take on a positive duty to recognize and report any problems or recommendations for repairs and maintenance that arise after snow clearing. This allows facility managers to potentially reduce their own liability by giving them an opportunity to inform their employees, occupants, customers, and anyone else coming to the property about potential dangers.

While this is not a guarantee against potential lawsuits, having records will place a facility manager in a stronger position to refute charges of negligence by demonstrating proper monitoring and maintenance.

In addition to an effective communication strategy, facility managers must also develop a comprehensive preparation strategy that takes into account all possible contingencies. The rock salt shortage this winter has demonstrated the inadequacy of many preparation plans. Facility managers must now realize that it is no longer adequate to have only one or two rock salt suppliers. Additional sources must be secured and necessary back-ups must be put in place for handling another shortage. This holds true for other resources as well, such as better and heavier equipment and additional labor back-up.

During the winter of 2013-14, many facility managers have faced for the first time the problem of removing heavy snow and ice from roofs of buildings, which is not normally included in contractor contracts and is considered emergency work. This undertaking can quickly become expensive, as it is often dangerous and complex, requiring rigging and buckets to slowly remove snow from a roof into a truck. This time consuming process can cost approximately \$200 per hour for a crew of four. While many managers may consider this to be a highly unlikely scenario, failure to include such a situation in contingency planning is problematic and shortsighted. By planning ahead for these potential problems, facility managers can avoid higher costs that will be charged in emergency situations.



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The winter of 2013-14 has thrown into sharp focus the dangers of complacency and overly optimistic predictions of winter weather. Facility managers cannot afford to view last winter as an anomaly, but instead must learn to prepare for the worst each and every year.

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