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Road salt cost emerges as big concern for upcoming Northeast Ohio winter

By John Arthur Hutchison, The News-Herald

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When people think about the salt used to treat roads in the winter, they usually don't consider it a "four-letter" word. However for the upcoming winter, that's what some officials are jokingly calling salt after reviewing recent bids. In Lake County, county commissioners in late August rejected bids the county received for road salt when the only bidder, Chicago-based Morton Salt, Inc., submitted a price of \$102 per ton. Last year, the county paid \$32 per ton. Commissioners then passed a resolution Sept. 4 to advertise again for road salt bids for the Lake County Engineer's Office.

"We're going to rebid and who knows what it will come in," county Engineer James R. Gills said. He has heard from other county engineers across the state who report receiving prices as high as \$136 per ton from potential salt contractors while others received no bids at all.

Winter forecasts generally call for the upcoming season to be about the same or worse as last year and contractors seem to know this as well, Gills said.

"I would imagine that's part of it," he said. "They had problems supplying everybody last year. I don't know what their thinking is. How do you go 3 to 4 times more than the previous year?"

He said the price of fuel hasn't increased to make it a significant reason for the high salt prices and there are no new taxes on salt.

"It's kind of a ridiculous, uncalled for increase," Gills told commissioners at an Aug. 28 meeting. He said engineers across the state through the County Engineers Association of Ohio have been in discussions with state legislators and would like to see the governor's office more involved.

In the meantime, Gills said there are likely to be more use of alternatives, including more pre-treatment of roads to help keep them free from snow and ice.

He said motorists should be prepared for roads to be less clear if the winter is comparable to last year. In 2013, the Lake County Engineer's Office had a contract for up to 15,000 tons of salt through Morton Salt and the amount used cost around \$450,000, Gills said.

There are about 3,000 tons left in the bins, and Gills said he plans to put in an order for about 4,000 tons more at last year's price since the contract ends Sept. 31

He said if 15,000 tons would be purchased this year at more than \$100 per ton, it could cost around \$1.5 million.

"That's a heck of a hit on my budget," he said. "We're very actively trying to work around this, believe me."

His office is responsible for snow removal for 90 lane miles on Route 2 and about 220 lane miles involving county roads.

Geauga County Engineer Joe Cattell said his office has fared relative well for the past two years after

deciding to join in a contract for salt with the Ohio Department of Transportation.

Cattell said his office is responsible for snow removal for 236 miles of county roads.

For this upcoming winter, his office will pay a little more than \$55 per ton for salt, he said.

The county used to get bids for salt on its own and sometimes it would save money compared to what ODOT would pay, while other times it would not.

“It’s not always the cheapest, but it worked out that way this year and last year,” Cattell said.

He usually budgets for about 10,000 tons of salt to be used each winter and has about 2,500 tons in storage after buying some salt this summer.

“I’m expecting I will have to buy another 8,000, which will cost me about \$450,000,” he said.

Cattell said the county will also plan to step up efforts to pre-treat roads and will have two new additional trucks equipped to do so to bring the total to four.

“We found we could use less salt if we can pre-treat before the storms, but the road has to be dry before you put it down,” he said. “When you have the right application it does save on the amount.”

URL: <http://www.news-herald.com/general-news/20140909/road-salt-cost-emerges-as-big-concern-for-upcoming-northeast-ohio-winter>

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