

CDOT's 'glorious gunk' raises local environmental eyebrows

By Kara Tatone

Telluride Daily Planet Jan 27, 2004

Whether it's smeared on the windshield or in newspaper ads, Colorado Department of Transportation's controversial use of the chemical deicer magnesium chloride is all too evident this winter. A new CDOT educational ad campaign has drawn the attention of both concerned environmentalists and motorists.

CDOT began the campaign to promote safe driving across the state last fall, and since early January it has been seen in "Glorious Gunk" ads informing motorists that the department is promoting safe driving by laying down liquid deicers on state highways, including the Telluride region's 15-mile stretch from Lizard Head Pass to the Highway 62 cutoff just past Placerville.

But not all agree mag chloride is the only solution to ice- and snow-free roads, and complaints about the ads are growing.

CDOT started the Coloradans for Safe Winter Driving coalition in October to educate the public about the department's winter highway maintenance, which last season included approximately 10 million gallons of liquid mag chloride on the state's roads, and in the Telluride area, more than 200,000 gallons and 800 tons of sand treated with the chemical has been slathered on state roads.

The new coalition is supported by state members, AAA Colorado, Colorado Automobile Dealers Assoc., Colorado State Patrol, Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau, Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association, and Excel Energy, and should "expand CDOT's ability to deliver important information to the public," executive director Tom Norton said last fall.

"Basically it's for educational purposes," CDOT spokeswoman Nancy Shanks said. "We wanted to make sure we're educating the public on where we're using magnesium chloride, the pros and cons on where and how it works."

But Sheep Mountain Alliance director Joan May said the campaign aptly followed growing complaint from a number of Colorado communities, Telluride included. SMA sent a petition letter with more than 500 signatures to CDOT's Durango office in September suggesting the department use one of several deicing alternatives available.

"They basically said 'we hear you' and sent the petition to the Denver office," May said. "There are more communities throughout the state that are upset [with mag chloride use], and definitely there is a lot of criticism from us, we've had lots and lots of complaints. And now they're running the ads - we know the argument, but we know there are alternatives out there."

The ads state the liquid deicer improves air quality over the old use of sand and salt that filled the air with particulate matter, but CDOT also warns motorists to wash cars after driving in storms, something May said contributes to another kind of pollution.

"Cars are corroding and will end up in landfills faster. Cars are being washed more frequently and so mag chloride ends up in the river," said May. "It may help better air quality but there are other solutions out there."

And it's during mag chloride's off-season that adverse environmental affects are showing up along roadsides and are attributed by some to the chemical. The past two summers drew

particular attention to the winter use as roadside trees and shrubs turned a premature brown.

Shanks said CDOT and the University of Northern Colorado are currently running environmental studies on several test sites throughout the state on environmental effects of the deicer, other pollutants, and beetles, a study of "the big picture," Shanks said.

"We are going to do tests on roadside vegetation, but not just that, we want to include all kinds of elements," she said, "be it drought, pollution, or bugs."

According to CDOT, applications of the compound have reduced snow and ice-related accidents in the I-70 corridor by an average of 14 percent as traffic volume has increased by 23 percent.

"Liquid anti-icers and de-icers are better for the environment than other alternatives, including sand and salt," CDOT's fact sheet reads. "While some sand and salt use is still necessary for CDOT's overall winter maintenance program, increased use of liquids has drastically reduced air pollution associated with sand use. The amount of sand run-off that endangers roadside plant life as well as the amount of silt that goes into streams causing damage to aquatic life, especially at higher elevations, has been greatly reduced."

"There is no denying it - it's an apples and oranges argument you can't say one is really better," May said. "But the ads don't say there are solutions. They say yes it's better for air quality but leave out other solutions that we should be switching to."

The Town of Telluride currently uses one of the alternatives, a combination liquid of corn-based organic inhibitors mixed with magnesium chloride that came about through a Telluride Town Council request to find an alternative to deicing the stretch from Mahoney Drive to Society Turn.

"It's the biggest mess there is from my personal standpoint," said Telluride Tire and Auto's Stuart Armstrong. "It really just deteriorates the finish on a car, just eats up a painted surface. It serves a purpose, but personally I think they use too much of it."

And though mag chloride may eat away at already rusted areas on older cars and new wax finishes, and dulls custom wheels, Armstrong said under the hood, the chemical doesn't seem to really effect an engine.

"Already rusted parts will continue to rust or it can speed up the rusting process," said Armstrong. "You pretty much have to wash your car all the time, otherwise it starts eating away. As far as the engine, it doesn't hurt how it runs."

"It seems like a no-win situation. We get calls all the time with complaints, some say they hate it, but others say [CDOT] isn't using enough," said Armstrong. "Personally I'd like to see them not use it - it's a waste, and it's killing trees."

SMA will keep up with CDOT's deicers, May said of an ongoing petition list.

"We'll just keep petitioning them. We're doing it this winter and trying to ~~stop~~ stop it," May said. "One thing is clear; people in rural areas just don't like it."

Liquid deicers on average cost about 37 cents per gallon, and about \$100,000 for liquid application, and sand infused with mag chloride runs about the same price.

Deicers are usually applied just before storms set in to prevent ice from forming. Last winter crews used nearly 10 million gallons of liquid products on roads statewide and CDOT anticipates about the same amount this winter.

Reproduction of copyrighted material is at the discretion of the individual, and is made pursuant to the individual's election under 17 USC 107, the Fair Use exception to Federal copyright restrictions.