

Outlawing SAND for winter use ?????

There is a certain rumor spreading across Maine which says that using sand for winter sanding will be "outlawed" by the year 2004. This is simply UNTRUE.

The misinterpretation of Federal EPA Clean Air standards is providing the basis of this false message. Because some sand breaks down to very small particles after it is applied to a road in the winter, it does create air quality problems in some areas because of the airborne dust particles. This can result in breathing problems, asthma attacks, or long term lung damage or even premature death.

The EPA is required to set standards at a level which will protect public health. Using monitors and the latest scientific equipment to monitor the "dust" (formally called particulate matter (PM)) in the air, the EPA can designate certain areas of the State as "nonattainment areas" because the amount of "dust" in the air exceeded their standards. The particular standard is called "PM10" which means that the particulate matter in the air is smaller than 10 microns (a micron is one millionth of a meter). The "dust" could be from smoke, dust, factory smokestacks, or even wood-burning chimneys. Since February, 1991, there has only been one nonattainment area in Maine and that was in downtown Presque Isle. A combination of traffic and fine, dirty sand used for winter sanding created clouds of dust in the downtown area. However, since 1991, there has only been one violation of the PM10 standard in Presque Isle. A combination of careful sanding, lots of salt, and sweeping/vacuuming equipment now keeps the downtown within compliance.

With the passage of the new transportation bill (TEA-21) in the summer of 1998, a different standard has been set by the EPA. This was a court-ordered requirement to the EPA based on public comment, discussion, and over 250 studies. The new standard is set at 2.5 microns, hereinafter called "PM2.5". However, this standard was recently challenged and it is currently on hold, pending court action. For the time being, PM10 remains the standard across Maine.

Whatever the standard becomes in the future, if the air becomes dirty enough, there are a variety of options to deal with the "dirty air". Included in the options might be a method to reduce dust from winter sand, IF that was a problem. This could mean switching to a cleaner, sharper sand, or using a liquid anti-icer/deicer, or using less sand and more salt, etc.

Until these new "nonattainment areas" (if any) are identified, nothing changes in the State of Maine. Sand will NOT be outlawed, salt will NOT be outlawed, and the EPA is NOT requiring anyone to do anything beyond complying with the current PM10 standard.

Call the Center if you need future details.

(Reviewed by M & O and Planning's Air Quality Section -- Dec. 99)