

Taking stock of the salt situation

This winter's bad weather crisis may be a distant memory for some. But Phil Brennan looks at how councils, their representative bodies such as the Association for Public Service Excellence, suppliers and government bodies can work together now in an effort to ensure the salt shortages experienced then are not repeated

The memories of last winter's weather, snow and ice, blocked roads and abandoned cars, closed shops and offices, have faded away for most people now the sun has arrived. But for highways engineers responsible for winter maintenance programmes, the panic they felt as salt stocks disappeared on gritting lorries without being replenished are still etched on their minds.

The weather in January and February may have been the worst for 20 years, but council responsibilities to keep highways safe and open remain whatever the weather and councils need salt in order to fulfil their duties. As such they are dependent upon the salt providers.

At the APSE Roads, Highways and Street Lighting Seminar at Newcastle in February, Paul O'Brien, chief executive of APSE, chaired a debate on salt supplies and council requirements to highlight some of the main issues for both suppliers and their customers. Bob Ray, sales and distribution manager from Cleveland Potash Ltd, who sponsored the debate, and Derek Heap, head of technical services at Lancashire County Council, spoke at the event.

Paul O'Brien described the work APSE had done for its member authorities during the winter crisis, which included a salt brokerage service to put those with spare supplies of salt in touch with those whose supplies had virtually disappeared. APSE also maintained contact with senior government officials, to ensure the voice of local government was being heard at the highest levels and with COBRA and the Local Resilience Teams to inform members of progress. APSE also contributed to publicity of the issue including an interview with BBC Radio West Midlands and regular contact with Dave McLuckie of Cleveland Potash Ltd to inform members of the current state of affairs from one of the major salt suppliers.

Bob Ray of Cleveland Potash Ltd highlighted the unusual nature of the weather and reiterated that this was not an annual event. It was even more unusual in that poor weather conditions were experienced right across the UK rather than in localised areas. Cleveland Potash Ltd had concentrated on salt rather than potash production (with commercial implications for the company) and ensured extra deliveries from its sister mine in Spain to meet customer demands, he said.

In terms of lessons from this winter, Mr Ray highlighted the need for councils and suppliers to maximise stock levels by November and to keep them as high as possible through to February. He noted that ordering smaller amounts of salt more often would help the suppliers and be most likely to result in successful deliveries. He realised that councils have a difficult job to do to balance the resources they invest in stocks against the likelihood of poor weather. He said: 'The financial restraints that councils have operated under over recent years have led to a number of storage facilities closing as councils attempt to make savings. We no longer deliver to many councils that we used to and the onus is on the suppliers to store salt that was previously stored at council depots. The storage isn't a problem for us at Cleveland Potash but when there is a big rush for salt as there was last winter, the lack of councils' own stocks certainly added to the difficulties many councils experienced.'

Mr Ray argued that the attitude in Scotland is different from England. 'Although they have worse weather on average, Scottish councils keep stocks much nearer to the 100% level than English councils do and so are less reliant on just in time deliveries.'

He recommends closer monitoring of stocks and closer communication with suppliers. Most of all he feels that councils need to appreciate that they will encounter problems if they do not stock up to 100% of their own storage facilities: 'Those councils that manage their stock levels best and suffered minimal problems last winter, were those who kept their stocks up highest prior to the bad weather setting in.'

Derek Heap outlined the context of Lancashire County Council's winter maintenance service during the event in Newcastle; noting that the council had storage capacity for nearly 16,000 tonnes. It had used less than 15,000 tonnes on average over the past 7 years and had only used 10,800 tonnes in 2007-08 but this winter they had used over 30,000 tonnes. The authority operates a 'just in time' stock controls with maximum and minimum stock levels established at each depot and are reliant upon suppliers to maintain stock levels. When supplies stopped salt had to be moved between depots to ensure service delivery was maintained.

Mr Heap explained that their supplier (which was not Cleveland Potash Ltd) was unable to meet their supply contract responsibilities to maintain the agreed stocking profiles and as such the county's relationship with their provider had been strained. He outlined a number of issues which may arise as a result of last winter's bad weather not least of which was the potential increase in the price of salt if many councils decide to increase the stock levels they hold locally.

He was also concerned that suppliers might not be able to meet demand in the case of another winter of bad weather. Issues that needed to be considered by councils included a move away from "Just in Time" deliveries to "Just in Case" requiring higher stock levels, the merits of framework supply contracts and wider policy reviews. Lancashire had 500 tonnes of uncontrolled salt stocks in roadside salt bins across the county and these stocks had been plundered for non-highway purposes.

A number of lessons emerged from the debate in Newcastle to be considered by suppliers, councils and government departments and agencies to better address similar conditions in future. These included:

- better two way communication between councils and Local Resilience Teams/Government Regional Offices,

- customers ordering smaller amounts from suppliers but on a more regular basis,
- promotion of a willingness to share supplies (through an arrangement such as APSE's brokerage service)
- and guidance on mixing salt with grit, potash, refined salt and other additives to extend supplies.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council has had a salt management system in place for some time but has decided to re-visit this process and see where improvements can be made. The council is looking to maintain its stocks as close to 100% as possible from October through to March, stocks will then be allowed to fall to take advantage of summer pricing to build stocks back up again for the following winter.

Senior engineer, Ivan McMaster, said: "The level of stock and our ability to keep roads and pavements open has an impact on the level of service we are able to provide but it also has an impact on the image of the council as a whole. It is important therefore that we keep adequate stock levels in place to enable us to deliver this essential service".

East Riding of Yorkshire Council stores salt under cover in domes. As part of the management process it has been looking at ways to store more salt in its existing facilities. A salt pusher has been purchased to maximise the amount that can be stored. This allows the salt to be piled higher with approximately 20 per cent additional capacity.

At a price of £2,500 this is a relatively low cost investment that has had a significant impact on the ability of the council to store salt. In addition to this their salt supplier has agreed to a system of weekly audits and minimum re-order levels allowing stocks to be maintained and replenished continuously during the winter period.

It is clear that councils and suppliers are giving this issue serious thought and even though the poor weather last winter was unusual, there remains an opportunity to improve winter maintenance services.

Phil Brennan is principal advisor on highways at the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE). For further information contact: pbrennan@apse.org.uk