

Transportation ministry evaluating plow job

Bare pavement not achieved, official says

Updated 4 days ago

The Ministry of Transportation Ontario is evaluating highway maintenance by its contractor for the North Bay area this week after a thick coat of ice remained three days after a snowstorm Tuesday followed by extreme cold.

North Bay Ontario Provincial Police reported 27 collisions Wednesday and several more Thursday and Friday, not including what turned out to be a double fatal head-on crash on Highway 11 near Latchford or a firefighter killed on Highway 534 in Nipissing Township Tuesday afternoon.

MTO regional adviser Gordan Rennie said bare pavement must be achieved within a schedule of hours following a storm depending on the class of highway.

"With this latest storm event, our service provider, Transfield Services, did not achieve bare pavement within the time required by our contract," Rennie said, adding that consideration is given to the weather, available equipment and proper procedures.

"In this case, the conditions were particularly challenging with the heavy wet snow followed by a sudden drop in temperature.

"This tends to create snow being packed down by the traffic and temperatures too low for salt to be effective in melting the snow and allowing it to be plowed off of the highway," Rennie said.

Weather reports show snow began falling across the region early Tuesday and continued through the evening with total precipitation varying across the region from 10 to 16 centimetres, with a forecast "flash freeze" hitting the area before midnight. By morning, wet snow had turned into packed drift and many areas of the highway were covered in ice.

Rennie said operation officials know when trucks and plows are deployed because vehicle location devices transmit their movements. And the ministry reviews and compares Transfield's documentation and police reports.

He said the nature of the different storms and how they develop comes into the equation when fines or penalties are assessed.

"A severe or long storm event may delay restoration of the highway to normal conditions, even with the best efforts of highway crews. Extreme weather may result in the closing of the highway by the Ontario Provincial Police, who have the authority to close highways."

The MTO contract with Transfield, a 12-year, \$150-million deal announced in 2009 and beginning April 2010, defines operational requirements. Transfield must monitor weather and road conditions in order to respond "quickly and appropriately, spreading sand or salt within 30 minutes of the arrival of a storm event," Rennie said.

Plows must be deployed when there is an accumulation of two centimetres of snow or slush, he said, adding the type and amount of equipment is also outlined.

"For example, if 100% of the salt spreading equipment at a patrol facility on any route is not deployed within 30 minutes of the start of a storm event, the initial financial consequence is \$5,000 per route and \$1,000 for each 15 minutes until the equipment is deployed."

Highway 11, south of North Bay, is a Class 1 roadway and bare pavement must be achieved eight hours after the snow event passes. Highway 17 and Highway 11, north of the city, are considered Class 2 and must be bare 16 hours after the storm.

"The ministry's evaluation of this situation is ongoing," Rennie said.

The Nugget asked Transfield Service to comment by leaving a message with representative at a number for the public to lodge complaints or comments, but was told media inquires are referred to the MTO.

Rennie said Ontario highways are kept to a high standard.

"Ontario's roads are consistently ranked among the safest in North America and the Ministry of Transportation's winter maintenance standards are among the highest in North America and are consistent with best practices of other jurisdictions," he said. "Our ongoing review of winter maintenance operations has found ministry standards are being met in the North Bay area."

The public can contact Transfield at 705-840-2200 or 1-866-840-2232.

ddale@nugget.ca

Copyright © 2012 The North Bay Nugget