

ODOT will expand use of salt on roads

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

Chance of snow? Expect a sprinkling of salt too.

On the first eleven miles of Interstate 5 north of the California border, the average number of winter crashes dropped from 115 to 54 after the state's transportation department started using solid salt on a trial basis.

Because of the apparent success of that pilot program and directives from the Legislature, the state will continue to use salt sparingly on some major roadways this winter.

While it can be difficult to peg the exact cause of crashes, and the figures fluctuate from year to year, officials found that the two areas they tested as part of a pilot program from 2012 to 2017 saw a decline in crashes after they tried salt.

"It was amazing to see," said Dave Thompson, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Transportation. "The salt was really effective, and still we wanted to minimize its use."

ODOT will have salt on hand for the first 100 miles of the freeway north of California, on 200 miles of Interstate 84 and in hilly parts of the Portland metro area, as well as a 121-mile stretch of U.S. 95 in southeastern Oregon between Nevada and Idaho that was tested as part of the pilot program.

Since the 1990s, the state has used a liquid chemical deicer, which isn't always enough to keep snow



Contributed photo/Oregon Department of Transportation

Results of a test program suggest that using salt can reduce weather-related crashes. ODOT will have salt on hand for the first 100 miles of Interstate 5 north of California, on 200 miles of Interstate 84 and in hilly parts of the Portland metro area, as well as a 121-mile stretch of U.S. 95 in southeastern Oregon between Nevada and Idaho.

and ice from bonding to pavement, ODOT says.

The state has largely avoided solid salt, which can have deleterious environmental effects and is expensive to store. Solid salt has the same chemical composition — sodium chloride — as table salt.

Salt, through road runoff, can make its way into surface water, groundwater and soil, which can make it harder for plants to absorb

water. It can also corrode roads, bridges and vehicles more quickly.

But salt can also be very effective, especially in certain conditions, like freezing rain, which the transportation agency says is growing more common in Oregon. Salt will be just one component of the state's winter maintenance plans.

Through the five years of the pilot program, the department wanted to see whether a small amount of salt

could improve highway conditions and cut down on serious and fatal crashes.

On average, in areas tested near the California border, state crews applied about 246 pounds of salt per lane mile. In the stretch of U.S. 95 in southeastern Oregon, they applied about 190 pounds per mile.

A November 2017 report on the pilot project recommended between 150 and 300 pounds of salt should be applied per lane mile. ODOT was also required to use the least amount of salt possible to meet its goals, depending on weather and road conditions.

The winter of 2016-17, which buried the Portland area and Willamette Valley in snow and ice, prompted the department to consider using salt more widely, Thompson said.

And last year, lawmakers directed the state's Transportation Commission to develop a winter maintenance plan that included the use of salt or another solid de-icer.

The transportation department may use salt in Portland, Salem and Eugene as it sees fit, Thompson said.

The agency will also monitor high-traffic areas and places that get a lot of snow.

In Salem, the state maintains parts of Interstate 5 and sections of U.S. Highway 22, said Mark Becktel, the city's public works operations manager.

But the city of Salem has no plans to use solid salt this winter, Becktel said.

The city doesn't use rock salt but it does use magnesium chloride, another type of salt suspended in liquid.

Becktel said the city's forecasters are expecting more ice than snow.

"The issues we've been warned to be more prepared for are black ice and ice storms, wind storms, not so much the occurrence of snow," Becktel said.

"We would prepare for a full winter either way."

Not all snow is created equal. The Willamette Valley is warmer and much more humid than areas east of the Cascades.

Central Oregon, which typically sees a lot of snow, is much drier and colder, and powdery snow doesn't respond as well to solid salt, Thompson said.

Salt has other drawbacks.

Storing it properly can be pricey. The transportation department has requested more money in the upcoming two-year budget for more salt storage.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is concerned that using salt could attract animals to roads, resulting in more crashes.

But the transportation department found no correlation between using salt on the road and accidents involving animals.

The state's salt plan may change in the coming years.

"I expect we'll keep evolving this after the next year or two or three as we gain more experience, learn new lessons," Thompson said.

Oregon marijuana tax revenue grows as consumption booms

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregonians are buying more legal pot than expected.

That means they are also poised to pay more taxes on it — about \$12.5 million more in the current budget than state economists projected several months ago.

The average price of a gram of cannabis on the retail market has dropped from about \$10 in late 2016 to just above \$4 in mid-2018, according to state figures.

But tax collections continue to grow.

Altogether, Oregon consumers are projected to pay \$176 million in state marijuana taxes during the current budget cycle, which ends in mid-2019.

"Since Oregon levies its recreational marijuana tax based on the price of the product, the fact that actual tax collections have exceeded expectations is all the more impressive given the ongoing drop in prices," state economists said in a revenue forecast report last week. "For every ounce sold, or every edible purchased, Oregon is receiving less tax revenue per item due to the price decline."

Wholesale prices have also decreased in that period, but less dramatically.

Consumers are turning away from other sources, like the black market and medical marijuana, and toward recreational retail, state economists say.

And more Oregonians are using cannabis, according to the forecast.

Nationally, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration says the percentage of adults who report using marijuana in the past month has grown to 7.9 percent in 2017, compared to 6.5 percent in 2015.

In August, recreational marijuana consumers bought more than \$52.5 million worth of cannabis, according to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, which tracks sales data.

The OLCC says in that month alone, recreational and medical consumers in Oregon bought at least 16,000 pounds of usable marijuana, about 400,000 units of edibles and tinctures and more than 600,000 units of marijuana extracts and concentrates.

State economists say that the spate of local measures passed in November to allow cannabis in certain cities and counties aren't likely to nudge



EO Media Group/Mateusz Perkowski
Marijuana plants grow in a high tunnel at a farm near McMinnville. In August, recreational and medical consumers in Oregon bought at least 16,000 pounds of usable marijuana, about 400,000 units of edibles and tinctures and more than 600,000 units of marijuana extracts and concentrates.

tax collections up further, though.

Six cities voted to allow recreational marijuana, four of them repealing existing bans. Nearly thirty measures related to marijuana were on local ballots this November.

"In terms of recent elections, the places today voting on (marijuana) are all small and won't have that much of an impact on statewide sales," said state economist Josh Lehner in an email to the Oregon Capital Bureau. "It's not like there is another big population jurisdiction out there that has yet to legalize, I don't think."

Lehner said certain cities and counties could actually see declines in marijuana tax revenues now that more of them have voted to allow recreational marijuana within their boundaries.

"The border effect of where sales are legal and how consumers access them is important," Lehner said. "So a neighboring town may see some losses as more towns legalize."

Recreational marijuana retailers must charge a 17 percent state tax on sales.

Cities and counties can charge local taxes of up to 3 percent on sales, too, but state economists focus their projections on state marijuana taxes.

Sales to consumers with medical marijuana patient cards aren't taxed.

The tax money, minus administrative costs, goes to a dedicated state marijuana account that in turn goes to

K-12 education, mental health services, police and cities and counties.

The state Revenue Department couldn't provide detailed regional data on marijuana sales taxes.

"Many areas only have a few businesses operating within their limits," Joy Krawczyk, a spokeswoman for the tax agency, said in an email. "Providing information about how much was collected in that area — along with the use of other publicly-available information or knowledge held by one of the other taxpayers in that area — could allow for the determination of specifics of individual tax returns."

Disclosing the particulars of a return is illegal, Krawczyk said.

In the years to come, collections from recreational marijuana are likely to grow, although there are significant risks attendant with the marijuana industry, state economists said.

A significant possible downside: cannabis remains illegal under federal law, leaving the industry open to risk in the event of a federal crackdown. Oregon U.S. Attorney Billy Williams has expressed concerns about the illegal shipment of Oregon marijuana across state lines. Williams also believes the state is producing far more cannabis than its residents can consume.

In the long run, state economists say that cannabis could continue to have an economic impact through high "value-added products like oils, creams and edibles, in addition to niche, specialty strains" — a bit like the state's craft beer industry.



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Freedom Foundation files suit against Oregon labor unions

By Aubrey Wieber
Oregon Capital Bureau

A conservative think tank is suing two Oregon labor unions, saying they are collecting union dues in violation of a U.S. Supreme Court decision last June.

The class-action lawsuit, Anderson et al v. SEIU et al, was filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Portland.

In June, the Supreme ruled in Janus v. AFSCME that forcing all employees to pay dues and fees when they aren't union members violated the First Amendment.

The decision was considered by some to be a strong blow for organized labor. But in Oregon, where unions have deep roots, the effect has been minimal. Some union leaders reported an increase in membership.

In the months since, thousands of workers in Oregon have asked to withdraw from the unions, according to Aaron Withe, Oregon director of Freedom Foundation, which filed the case this week. About one-fourth was told they could withdraw from their unions, but would have to pay dues through an extended date set by the labor contract. According to the lawsuit, most have another year to pay.

Freedom Foundation is contesting that extended assessment.

Withe said that since they signed the agreement without knowing about the Janus decision, those agreements aren't valid.

Freedom Foundation sued on behalf of 10 plaintiffs, but claimed in the filing there are there are hundreds more.

Plaintiffs who were assessed by Service Employees International Union Local 503 include Loriann Anderson, an employee of Western Oregon University; Rene Layton, an employee of the Walla Walla County District Attorney's Office; Dennis Richey, an employee for Jackson County; and Melinda Wiltse, who works for Marion County.

Plaintiffs represented by American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 75 are Kerrin Fiscus, employed by the Oregon Board of Parole; Kenneth Hill, employed by the Oregon Military Department; Michael Miller, employed by the Oregon Department of Corrections; Bernard Perkins, who works for Lane County; Kathie Simmons, employed by the city of Portland and Kent Wiles, who works for NorthWest Senior and Disability Services.

The suit names the two unions, the employers and Katy Coba, the director of the Oregon Department of Administrative Services, as defendants.

Both unions declined to comment, as did the Oregon Department of Administrative Services.

Withe said the Freedom Foundation found the plaintiffs by helping workers opt out of their unions, and offering legal services to those still told they had to pay dues.

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