

ODOT Funding Package Resource Library

Winter Maintenance

During winter, the focus of our maintenance crews shifts to keeping roads as clear of snow and ice as possible. Winter storms can be unpredictable. Our staff work to prepare roads for anticipated storms with deicer and abrasives, and plow snow and ice once it hits the pavement.

Oregonians expect interstates and key highways to remain passible – and that’s our goal too. Delivering consistent service from year to year helps our communities properly prepare for road conditions they may encounter along their way.

Our Winter Toolbox

Winter maintenance involves plowing snow, placing sand for increased traction, applying deicing products, and managing winter highway closures.

Snowplows & Drivers

Plowing Oregon’s highways requires qualified drivers and a fleet of specialized equipment. Without a team with commercial driver licenses, our plows stay parked. Without trucks, our crews can’t remove snow. Nearly a third of ODOT’s approximately 375 snowplows remain in operation beyond their recommended service life. As equipment ages, repair costs increase, and reliability goes down.

Abrasives, Deicer & Salt

We use sand, cinders, deicer and salt to address winter conditions. We carefully select and apply treatment materials to minimize environmental impact, using only what’s necessary and focusing on environmentally sensitive alternatives where possible.

We use both liquid deicer and solid salt to treat roadways, depending on the predicted weather conditions and the roadway’s level of service. We maintain 105 liquid deicer locations across the state, as well as 26 salt sheds to address critical corridor needs.

Deicer, made of liquid magnesium chloride or sodium chloride with rust inhibitor, is the only tool we can apply proactively before a winter storm. It can only be applied in dry conditions (not in the rain), otherwise it washes away. Deicer inhibits snow or ice from bonding with the road surface, making later plowing easier and more effective.

Salt is a good tool, but it loses effectiveness as the temperature decreases. On average, ODOT's annual salt use remains among the lowest in the country, to limit the negative environmental impacts and corrosion on vehicles and infrastructure.

When deicer and salt aren't the best options, sand is the abrasive material that helps improve road traction. When the temperatures are low or the road is wet, applying abrasives is our best option.

Every season is different

Winter maintenance is reactive work, and it varies each year. A light winter can mean the materials we purchased at the start of the season last longer, and our crews can tackle routine work instead of driving plows. When heavy or widespread storms hit, all hands are on deck working to mitigate the impacts for Oregonians.

In January 2024, winter hit hard statewide. Over the course of a seven-day storm, our crews worked 24/7 with more than 20,000 hours of additional staff time. We used 6.5 million pounds of salt, 168,099 gallons of fuel, and in the central and southern valley alone, we plowed nearly 78,000 miles.

Budgets Reduction Impacts

Early in the 2023-2025 budget cycle, winter maintenance faced a 5% budget reduction coupled with a 15% reduction due to inflation and our reduced buying power. These cuts would directly impact our intended level of service. The severity of this budget cut was limited thanks to an infusion of General Fund from the Oregon Legislature during the 2024 Session. Without this funding, communities would have experienced more temporary road closures or chain restrictions due to storm events, and fewer responders on the road to address incidents. Without consistent and reliable funding, we will again face these challenges in future budget cycles. Oregonians will see:

- Less frequent plowing, with no plowing for some low-volume roads.
- Limited use of materials, like sand, salt and deicer, on non-interstate highways.
- More frequent and longer lasting chain and traction tire requirements, along with increased likelihood for full closures.

Prioritizing Safety

When storms are forecast, our crews mobilize and prepare to deice, salt, sand and plow. When necessary, we announce chain requirements and operate enforcement stations to support traveler safety and reduce incidents.

We prioritize highways based on safety, traffic volume and the impact on commerce. Major routes and those critical for emergency services are plowed and treated first, with medium- and low-volume roads handled as soon as possible thereafter.

We do everything we can to keep the roads open and moving, but if conditions become too hazardous—like heavy snow, ice, or downed trees—we close roads or establish detours to prevent crashes and ensure traveler safety. Temporarily closing a highway also requires a full team of people. When storms become particularly severe, we may not have sufficient staff needed to shut down the many on-ramps in urban areas, or over long stretches of highway.