WINTER'S HERE – BUT THE SNOW WILL MELT

Another long, cold, snowy Central New York winter is underway. Certainly this is great news if you are an avid skier or pond hockey player but for most of us, winter also means getting up early to shovel snow from our walkways and cars before starting a slow and sometimes hazardous drive to work or school. It's hard to imagine that during these long, dark days of winter, anyone is thinking about the impact winter weather has on the quality of our lakes and streams. However, once you have had a chance to thaw out from your latest winter activity, consider that all the snow and ice you've been enjoying, or just plain coping with, will eventually melt and drain to the nearest surface water body. While the thought of melting snow and ice may provide a comforting image, it's also a reminder that snow, just like rain, has the ability to accumulate and transport pollutants to our local water resources.

Most people understand that the flow of rain over the land surface creates water quality problems by washing exposed soil and other substances such as fertilizer, oil and litter into storm drains and eventually, nearby lakes and streams. Somehow, we think of snow differently, perhaps because we have better control over it while it is in its solid phase. As long as our sidewalks and roadways are clear, snow doesn't present too much of a problem. The story is much different in the spring when the melting snowpack transforms our lawns into mud flats, floods our rivers and clouds our lakes and streams.

It's easy to lose sight of the fact that the substances we apply to keep our roads and driveways clear of snow and ice will eventually be carried into our waterways with the warmth of spring. Traditional rock salt (sodium chloride) corrodes steel in bridges and cars, shortening the longevity of both; it can affect spawning of certain fish species; and it can harm vegetation if allowed to accumulate in the soil. In some areas, chloride contaminates drinking water wells.

The rule of thumb at this time of year can be summed up in one word: balance. As you spread rock salt on your own driveway, don't apply more than you need… or you may be simply flushing chlorides, and your money, down the storm drain. Consider trying one of the non-toxic, biodegradable ice-melts that are now available to homeowners in place of rock salt. Although these products are more expensive than traditional rock salt, they are less harmful to the environment and often have residual effects that prevent new ice from forming on sidewalks and driveways. As a result, you may not need to use these products as frequently as traditional rock salt.

Many homeowners use sand to provide traction on their walkways. Although effective, wind and melting snow water can transport sand and grit into nearby storm drains and surface waters. When sand and grit settle on a lake or stream bottom, they reduce habitat for fish and aquatic insects and create a substrate for unwanted plant and weed growth. If you do use sand to create traction around the exterior of your home, remember to sweep and collect it as soon as conditions allow.

Winter driving conditions can be treacherous and require extra precaution. Before you get behind the wheel you'll almost certainly make sure you have plenty of windshield washer fluid in the reservoir so that you can see (and get!) where you're going. Unfortunately, most windshield washer fluids contain toxic methanol, as well as phosphates, which contribute to algal blooms in our local lakes and ponds. A single spray to clear the windshield may not add a lot of chemicals to the environment but, think about how many gallons of windshield fluid you use during a typical winter season. Then think about all of the other cars on the road and consider they are probably using at least as much as you are. All of that fluid

eventually ends up on the road and in our lakes and streams. The next time you reach for a gallon of traditional windshield washer fluid at your local auto parts store, take a look at the wide range of biodegradable alternatives that are available, including tablets and concentrated liquids that are as effective and may be less expensive than what you are currently using.

Even in winter, vehicle fluids such as motor oil and antifreeze must be maintained. If you change the fluids in your vehicle at home, remember that your local service station is required by law to accept used oil, and other automotive fluids can be brought in for recycling during county-wide household hazardous waste days. Never discharge used vehicle fluids directly on the ground or into a storm drain or catch basin. Whatever flows into the storm drain system is simply piped directly to a stream where it will impact wildlife habitat and recreational usage such as boating, fishing, and perhaps, swimming.

It's true, winter changes everything - but only for a short time. We'll soon be enjoying all that a Central New York spring and summer has to offer. In the meantime, we should be mindful of everything we can do to protect our water resources now, despite their altered state.