

Struggling to buy road salt? You're not the only one: Caledon businesses feel effects of road salt shortage

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Due to an early winter and the colder conditions for precipitation, road salt made an appearance earlier than usual this year, salting our roads, sidewalks, and our driveways.

Municipalities have been using their salt supplies earlier and more frequently due to the increase, resulting in quicker depletion, and with salt mines in Ontario struggling to keep up, many shelves are left empty.

GB Stone Inc. is a full-service landscape and hardscape yard servicing the Halton and Peel Regions out of Caledon. They stock and sell road salt to their landscaping customers. They have been serving the surrounding communities for 11 seasons now.

Andrew Little, with GB Stone Inc., says that they are definitely feeling a "shortage," and that getting their hands on road salt this year has been difficult.

Little adds that when it does come in, it's less frequent than usual.

In the past, he explains, their customers could come in and pick up their supplies at any time, but this year they've been prioritizing communication to let customers know when the stock arrives.

"This year has been a bit trickier," says Little. "We just keep in touch with them to say, this is what I have left, these are when my next loads are coming in. We'll just have to keep an eye on it until they get caught up so we're stocked back up again."

Little also says they saw an increase in demand earlier than usual.

"It was definitely earlier than what anybody was really expecting."

He adds that when it comes to their winter business, it's been picking up in recent years as Caledon continues to develop and grow.

"Our focus was to make sure that we could build off that and that we had products to service that community and those in it," says Little.

"It was hard this year because it was just slower coming in, trying to find it, having loads cancelled, and you're trying to build your business here. But we found a way through it and we're only halfway through the winter so we'll see how the rest of it goes. But for now, I think we seem to have it down with our customers."

Little adds that's one of the trickiest parts of their business: not knowing when winter starts or when it will end.

"It was an early start. You kind of try to prepare for it, but I don't know if you ever really can," he says.

The salt hasn't been as readily available as it was in past years, he says, but "it's also been an odd winter."

Little explains with both the early start and the weather's rapid changes from warm to cold, to freezing rain to snow, he feels it's part of the issue causing the shortage.

Geoff Coulson from Environment Canada gives an inside look at the winter season we've been experiencing thus far.

Coulson consulted the temperature and precipitation snowfall information for the winter so far, looking at the information for the past 70 days and comparing it to the long-term average. He says that "a few potential reasons for the need for road salt in different parts of the province certainly jump out when you look at some of these factors."

Firstly, temperatures in southern Ontario, including the GTA and Caledon, are experiencing colder-than-normal temperatures, he explains, which creates more of an opportunity for mixed precipitation, freezing rain, ice pellets, and snow.

Anyone who took their daily walk last Friday would have felt the spring-like temperatures, and Coulson adds that day-to-day variability is still very much something the public will have to deal with as we go through the rest of January and into February.

When looking at these longer-range models, Coulson says to expect January to remain somewhat colder than normal, especially as there is "plenty more winter left to go."

Although Southern Ontario has been experiencing these weather changes and more active weather, he says that, certainly in the north of the province, there's been another area of active storm systems that's resulted in a fair amount of snow or mixed precipitation in those areas as well, for areas near Lake Superior.

Regarding his estimate of the shortage, Coulson says it is a culmination of colder-than-normal temperatures, leading to salt use on slippery surfaces, and an active lake-effect snow season off Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, for example, with some areas already seeing more snowfall than usual.

"Normally, it's mostly northern Ontario by the second half of November you expect to see wintry weather, whereas in southern Ontario we could go through December remaining relatively mild having maybe a few snow events here and there. But this winter in particular has seen sort of active winter weather in a number of locations in the province all the way back to starting in early November," says Coulson.

"It was an early start to wintry weather," continues Coulson. "We've kept up with it over the course of the last number of weeks, and also a number of events where it wasn't necessarily snow but we had events of freezing rain or ice pellets and again those situations would demand that local road crews go out to make sure that the roadways are properly taken care of."

Going forward, he says to keep in mind the colder-than-normal temperatures anticipated, as well as the more active weather to come, especially for those ready to hit the roads.

"It's always a good reminder to stay on top of the latest forecast for their area especially if they're planning travel, not only what the weather is doing in their location but what the forecast is for their destination because the conditions can be highly variable at this time of year both in terms of temperature and precipitation so it's always a good idea to stay on top of the latest statements from Environment Canada to know what you could be dealing with on the roadways."

The shortage is not just affecting businesses, but also residents trying to find road salt for their own driveways and sidewalks.

A spokesperson from The Home Depot Canada says that they "are actively working to manage inventory of rock salt and ice melt in our stores."

They also suggested that customers may also consider products for traction, such as sand and gravel, and snow tools like shovels and snowblowers to manage winter weather.