HB216: Environment - Salt Applicator Certification Program - Establishment

House Environment and Transportation Committee
February 8, 2022

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Barve and Members of the Committee,

Clean Water Action supports HB216 to create a Salt Applicator Certification Program to encourage efficient winter maintenance on roads, parking lots, and sidewalks through salt or salt alternatives. We would also encourage the state to consider mandatory and enforceable standards for salt application and measurable goals (with action plan) to reduce salinity in our waterways.

Road salt is a significant contributing factor to the increasing salinity of our waterways. Across Maryland, 28 rivers and streams are impaired by chloride, or salt. Our waterways not only experience spikes in salinity during the winter, but also salt use has a cumulative impact on groundwater chloride concentrations over time, so this is a problem that will continue to worsen without intervention. **In 2015, the Potomac River, an important drinking water source for more than five million people, was three times saltier than it was 25 years ago.**

Salinity in waterways is more than just a problem for changing the water conditions for the fish, insects, and various creatures that live in or around that body of water. Sublethal salt levels impair the health, reproduction, and behavior of many organisms, and road salt persists in the waterways long after application.

Increased salt levels in waterways and groundwater is also a concern for public health, especially for people with high blood pressure and other health conditions. Rising salinity in groundwater is a concern for people on well water, especially if more salt is added through the use of a water softener. But rising salinity is also a problem for people on public water, even if we feel more removed from our water source. The vast majority of Marylanders on public water are drinking from surface water sources - rivers and reservoirs fed by creeks. **As our streams and rivers get saltier, so do our drinking water sources.**

Higher chlorides in water also increases water corrosivity, potentially increasing the risk of lead and copper leaching from pipes. This can lead to significant damage to road infrastructure and home appliances and leads to the mobilization of heavy metal and radionuclide from soils into the groundwater.[1]

[1] Lazur, Andy. "Review of Implications of Road Salt on Groundwater Quality - Corrosivity and Mobilization of Heavy Metals and Radionuclides."
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344034638_Review_of_Implications_of_Road_Salt_Use_on_Groundwater_Quality-Corrosivity_and_Mobilization_of_Heavy_Metals_and_Radionuclides

We need to get a handle of our salt usage and mandatory certification of private applicators is a step in the right direction, but we also need to tackle overapplication of salt on public roadways and homeowner misuse as well.

Record keeping and reporting would allow the state to more easily understand trends of salt usage and make changes to better protect our waterways from the rising threat of salt. We also understand the fears about liability encourage over-salting. As a state, our perceptions of travel during snow and ice need to change.

Salt levels in our waterways are increasing, a problem for drinking water and public health, aquatic life, and infrastructure.

Thank you,
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