Traffic volumes determine snow-control priorities

When storms hit, WYDOT maintenance crews are on the road applying a salt-sand mixture to improve traction and plowing when needed. WYDOT crews have more than 400 conventional snow plows across the state and 18 snow-blowing rotary plows they can throw into the battle.

At that point, the department’s statewide snow-removal plan goes into effect. It establishes sanding and plowing priorities for the system of interstate, arterial and collector routes, based on the relative amounts of traffic the highways carry. Four levels of service have been established.

High volume (IA, IB) service is provided on interstates and principal arterial and urban routes. If necessary, crews will work up to 24 hours (IA) or 20 hours (IB) a day to maintain a bare roadway for driving safely at reasonable speeds.

Medium volume (II) service is provided on lesser-used arterial routes. The goal is to keep the roadway passable for drivers who are taking reasonable winter driving precautions, although with less emphasis on keeping the pavement bare.

Low volume (IIIA, IIIB) service generally involves other less-traveled minor arterial and collector routes and is provided after high-volume and medium-volume routes have been cleared, with exceptions sometimes made for routes that carry school buses or similar traffic. Low-volume service is provided only during daylight hours. Level IIIB state highways receive minimum levels of service as resources become available.

During severe storms, scheduling depends on available personnel and equipment. Roads tagged for high volume service will be plowed first; medium and low volume highways will be handled as soon as possible thereafter.

As bad weather clears, cleanup is undertaken only after all roads have been provided with their designated levels of service.
Ice and snow can make driving a challenge

Because winter storms can develop quickly in Wyoming, it’s wise to prepare. Make sure your car is running smoothly and check the brakes. Inflate your tires to the pressure recommended by the vehicle and tire manufacturers. Letting air out of tires increases wear and doesn’t improve traction. Putting sand bags or concrete blocks in the trunk or bed of a pickup doesn’t necessarily increase traction, and it may increase the danger of skidding, particularly if it is not distributed evenly and secured in place.

Replace old windshield wiper blades and make sure your windshield cleaning fluid has antifreeze. Top off your fuel tank often. Running out of fuel is a calamity that’s easy to avoid. Don’t carry filled portable gasoline containers. They increase the chance of explosion in a collision.

Make sure the oil and other fluids are full. Check lights and turn signals. Keep all lights free of ice and snow, and use low beams when driving through blowing snow.

Subzero temperatures are common in wintertime Wyoming. Familiarize yourself with the procedures recommended in your vehicle owner’s manual for starting the engine in such adverse conditions. The manual also should include recommendations for warming up the engine, but some warm-up may also be needed to defrost the windshield before you get on the road.

Remember to clean snow off your shoes before you get in the vehicle. Snow on your shoes can make your accelerator and brake pedals slippery, creating a safety hazard.

Seat belts save lives, but only if they are used. About 70 percent of those killed on Wyoming roads each year are not wearing seat belts. Be sure to fasten seat belts and put children in proper safety restraint systems before going anywhere, no matter how short the trip.

Know and obey the law

Wyoming’s chain law includes two levels of restrictions that can be implemented on specific highway sections when conditions warrant.

Level 1
When conditions are hazardous, travel may be restricted to:
- Vehicles equipped with tire chains;
- Vehicles with adequate snow tires;
- All-wheel-drive vehicles; or
- Necessary emergency vehicles and snowplows.

Level 2
When conditions are extremely hazardous, travel may be restricted to:
- Vehicles equipped with tire chains;
- All-wheel-drive vehicles equipped with adequate mud and snow or all-weather rated tires; or
- Necessary emergency vehicles and snowplows.

Commercial vehicles must have chains on at least two drive wheels at opposite ends of the same drive axle.

Do not stop in the driving lane to install or remove chains!

Penalties for violations:
- $250 for violating the travel restriction;
- $750 for a violation that results in a road closure.

Road Closures
WYDOT, the Highway Patrol, police and sheriffs have authority to close roads whenever they consider it necessary for public health or safety. During the winter, this means highways can be closed due to crashes or because of ice, snow or poor visibility. Remember, although conditions may be favorable at the closure gate, conditions can be much different a few miles down the road.

Violating a road closure carries a penalty of up to a $750 fine and 30 days in jail. However, the real danger of running a road closure gate is being injured in a crash or getting stranded and facing the risks of hypothermia or even freezing to death.

In your trunk...

Before traveling any significant distance in wintertime Wyoming, motorists should make sure they have the following items in their vehicles:
- Tire chains of the proper size;
- A shovel and small bag of sand or kitty litter to provide traction if your vehicle gets stuck;
- A snow brush and ice scraper;
- A can of deicer for frozen door locks and wiper blades;
- Blankets or sleeping bags;
- Water and dehydrated foods, in case you get stranded for an extended period;
- An emergency first-aid kit well stocked with medical supplies and bandages;
- Flares and flashlights for nighttime emergencies;
- Booster cables in case of a dead battery.

Geographic variety affects winter driving

Driving through central Wyoming on US 26-287, you’ll cross Topowater Pass at an elevation of 9,658 feet. There is snow on the road throughout most of the winter, so drivers are advised to slow down, stay alert and proceed with caution.

North-South highways
Four principal north-south routes cross Wyoming. Because the prevailing wind is from the west, drivers should be aware of strong crosswinds and limited visibility during storms on these roads.

Interstate 25 between Cheyenne and Buffalo crosses a wide variety of country, ranging from hills and valleys to vast prairies. US 85 from Cheyenne to the South Dakota border crosses country very similar to I-25, but, because it is primarily a two-lane road and not a divided highway, it requires even greater driving attention during bad weather.

There are broad plains in the Rawlins, Riverton and Casper areas. Canyon roads, hills and broad plains in the Big Horn Basin extend from Thermopolis to Lovell, Powell and Cody. Hard driving conditions can exist across all these areas.

On US 89 in western Wyoming, there is a high mountain pass between Cokeville and Alpine. US 189-191 passes through the Big Horns, Daniel and Hoback Junction. South Pass on WYO 28 between Faron and Lander reaches 7,550 feet in elevation.

First-aid tips

Cold weather, especially when endured for prolonged periods, can cause a variety of medical problems. The most common are:

Frostbite — Frostbite means skin tissue is freezing or has frozen and contains ice crystals. It appears as flushed skin turning white or yellowish. It is important to know frostbite victims don’t necessarily feel cold.

Rapidly rewarm a frostbitten area by immersing in very warm (101- to 108-degree) water, by warm water contact or by wrapping in blankets, coats or clothing.

Hypothermia — Hypothermia is the excessive loss of body heat and can be diagnosed by a victim’s numbness, shivering and drowsiness.

To prevent hypothermia, wear layered clothing made of wool, silk or a synthetic material such as polyester for greater insulation and protection from exposure. Avoid cotton garments.

To treat, gradually rewarm the victim using any available external heat source, such as the warm body of another. Unless hypothermia is severe, give the victim hot, nonalcoholic beverages. Handle a victim with care. They can be in shock, and shock increases the potential for heartbeat irregularities.

Water and snow can make driving a challenge

Be prepared before the storms arrive

Because winter storms can develop quickly in Wyoming, it’s wise to prepare. Make sure your car is running smoothly and check the brakes. Inflate your tires to the pressure recommended by the vehicle and tire manufacturers. Letting air out of tires increases wear and doesn’t improve traction. Putting sand bags or concrete blocks in the trunk or bed of a pickup doesn’t necessarily increase traction, and it may increase the danger of skidding, particularly if it is not distributed evenly and secured in place.

Replace old windshield wiper blades and make sure your windshield cleaning fluid has antifreeze. Top off your fuel tank often. Running out of fuel is a calamity that’s easy to avoid. Don’t carry filled portable gasoline containers. They increase the chance of explosion in a collision.

Make sure the oil and other fluids are full. Check lights and turn signals. Keep all lights free of ice and snow, and use low beams when driving through blowing snow.

Subzero temperatures are common in wintertime Wyoming. Familiarize yourself with the procedures recommended in your vehicle owner’s manual for starting the engine in such adverse conditions. The manual also should include recommendations for warming up the engine, but some warm-up may also be needed to defrost the windshield before you get on the road.

Remember to clean snow off your shoes before you get in the vehicle. Snow on your shoes can make your accelerator and brake pedals slippery, creating a safety hazard.

Seat belts save lives, but only if they are used. About 70 percent of those killed on Wyoming roads each year are not wearing seat belts. Be sure to fasten seat belts and put children in proper safety restraint systems before going anywhere, no matter how short the trip.

W inter storms strike quickly across Wyoming’s high plains and mountains. When they do, driving conditions can deteriorate rapidly and become very challenging. Drivers must be prepared, cautious and patient to get safely to their destinations in those conditions.

This brochure provides information on preparing vehicles for a typical winter trip in Wyoming and drive safely in storms.

It includes a list of supplies motorists should carry with them through the winter season, and offers pointers for driving on snowy and icy highways. It also provides tips for motorists who find themselves stranded in a storm.

The snow-control priorities plan and map included show what level of snow-removal service is provided on each highway segment in the state.

Winter Wheelin’ in Wyoming

First-aid tips

Cold weather, especially when endured for prolonged periods, can cause a variety of medical problems. The most common are:

Frostbite — Frostbite means skin tissue is freezing or has frozen and contains ice crystals. It appears as flushed skin turning white or yellowish. It is important to know frostbite victims don’t necessarily feel cold.

Rapidly rewarm a frostbitten area by immersing in very warm (101- to 108-degree) water, by warm water contact or by wrapping in blankets, coats or clothing.

Hypothermia — Hypothermia is the excessive loss of body heat and can be diagnosed by a victim’s numbness, shivering and drowsiness.

To prevent hypothermia, wear layered clothing made of wool, silk or a synthetic material such as polyester for greater insulation and protection from exposure. Avoid cotton garments.

To treat, gradually rewarm the victim using any available external heat source, such as the warm body of another. Unless hypothermia is severe, give the victim hot, nonalcoholic beverages. Handle a victim with care. They can be in shock, and shock increases the potential for heartbeat irregularities.

First-aid tips

Cold weather, especially when endured for prolonged periods, can cause a variety of medical problems. The most common are:

Frostbite — Frostbite means skin tissue is freezing or has frozen and contains ice crystals. It appears as flushed skin turning white or yellowish. It is important to know frostbite victims don’t necessarily feel cold.

Rapidly rewarm a frostbitten area by immersing in very warm (101- to 108-degree) water, by warm water contact or by wrapping in blankets, coats or clothing.

Hypothermia — Hypothermia is the excessive loss of body heat and can be diagnosed by a victim’s numbness, shivering and drowsiness.

To prevent hypothermia, wear layered clothing made of wool, silk or a synthetic material such as polyester for greater insulation and protection from exposure. Avoid cotton garments.

To treat, gradually rewarm the victim using any available external heat source, such as the warm body of another. Unless hypothermia is severe, give the victim hot, nonalcoholic beverages. Handle a victim with care. They can be in shock, and shock increases the potential for heartbeat irregularities.