

Driven to exhaustion

...(timeline February 2015) We have to keep plowing until the storm stops.

Why it is that DPW plow operators are expected to operate for indefinite periods of time? I completely understand the need to provide safe roads for travel but it almost seems like an oxymoron. Safe roads, free and clear of snow and ice but clogged with exhausted plow drivers, hmmm lets ponder that a while.

According the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration (FMCSA) a commercial truck driver can only drive for up to 11 hours out of a 14 hour period of on duty time. Even then this can only be done after a total of 10 hours of off duty time. So 10 hours off + 14 hours on duty and we get a full 24 hour period, of which only 11 of them can be used for drive time. (*Reference the FMCSA 49 CFR 395.3*)

Now comes the driver of a government vehicle, (local government includes plow operators) or those who are removing snow and ice. The Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration allows a State at its own discretion to exempt these drives from limited drive time. Meaning a plow driver could drive 24/7. Many States allow this if not all of them. (*Reference FMCSA 49 Certified Federal Regulation 383.3*) states in part, ..."A driver, employed by an eligible unit of local government, operating a commercial motor vehicle within the boundaries of that unit for the purpose of removing snow or ice from a roadway by plowing, sanding, or salting shall be exempt from the drive time limitations." Great, this makes it legal for plow drivers to plow an indefinite amount of time. The real questions are, is it safe or smart??? As drivers become more tired, they become less safe. Having driven a plow for 20+ years I have experienced this first-hand. After enough hours pass a driver might see LGM's in front of them (LGM = little green men) in the road. Then the LGM's start to dance on the plow and maybe even sit in the passenger seat telling us how to do our job.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 100,000 crashes are the direct result of driver fatigue each year. This leads to 1,550 deaths each year, 71,000 injuries and \$12.5 billion in monetary losses. Police data collection relies on information that is shared on an accident report form as there is no test to determine drowsiness like a breathalyzer.

Who is at risk for drowsy driving? Young people, men and adults with children. Adult men ages 18-29 are much more likely to drive drowsy than other age groups. Adults with children are more likely to drive drowsy than those without and shift workers are more likely than those who work a regular shift.

Ok maybe this is not all that news worthy but it helps to make a point. What is my point you ask? What are we doing about it? In almost every snow and ice class I teach I hear drivers say "we can't go home" or "we can sleep in the truck for an hour".

How can we achieve a real rest period for our drivers? Some towns and cities have bunk rooms where drivers can truly sleep in a bed. Others allow them to go home for rest. The problem with that is who is plowing if the drivers are sleeping? Sometimes no one or only a skeleton crew. I think it's time that we seriously consider shift workers for snow and ice operations.

Some compelling arguments against that are "our mayor or selectmen will not allow that" My response to that is why? Answer, money. Yes, it will cost more to have additional crews hired for winter operations but it would be much more expensive to pay a lawsuit caused by drowsy driving. As snow fighters we are committed to safety, but we often overlook our own.

I'm not sure how to bring about this much needed change and I'm sure that some will feel that it is not needed. For those of you who feel this this is important I would welcome your comments. You can reach me at mdsmith@umass.edu.