

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 6, 2025

1:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Ashley Carrick, Co-Chair
Representative Ted Eischeid, Co-Chair
Representative Genevieve Mina
Representative Cathy Tilton
Representative Elexie Moore

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Louise Stutes
Representative Kevin McCabe

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: WINTER ROAD MAINTENANCE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

ANDY MILLS, Legislative Liaison, Special Assistant to the
Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter
Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet."

BRAD BYLSMA, Director
State Equipment Fleet
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter
Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet."

JASON SAKALASKAS, Chief
Maintenance and Operations

Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet."

BURRELL NICKERSON, Manager
Maintenance and Operations
Central Region

Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet."

CHRISTINE LANGLEY, Director
Data Modernization and Innovation Office
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet."

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:32:11 PM](#)

CO-CHAIR TED EISCHEID called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. Representatives Mina, Tilton, Carrick, and Eischeid were present at the call to order. Representative Moore arrived as the meeting was in progress.

PRESENTATION: Winter Road Maintenance

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CO-CHAIR EISCHEID announced that the only order of business would be a presentation from the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities on winter road maintenance.

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ANDY MILLS, Legislative Liaison, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF), co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet" [hard copy included in the committee file]. On slide 1, he noted that because winter road maintenance is a core function of the department, multiple representatives from DOT&PF would be giving the presentation. He moved to slide 2 and pointed out

that DOT&PF has 80 maintenance shops across the state. He spoke about the distinct nature of the road system in the state, noting the challenge of covering the state's large geographic area. He pointed out the winter road maintenance priority map, as seen on slide 3. He referred to the 2022 legislative report [copy included in the committee file], which codifies the prioritization for clearing roads during the winter. He stated that the report is done for public transparency and internal usage, and he discussed the detailed information included in the report. He stated that this information is reviewed every 10 years.

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CO-CHAIR CARRICK questioned the priority system for clearing pedestrian pathways during the winter.

MR. MILLS responded that Fairbanks Area Surface Transportation (FAST) Planning was the first to gather this data in the state; therefore, FAST Planning has led the state in pedestrian and sidewalk prioritization. He explained that FAST Planning had identified the difference between major road usage and pedestrian pathway and transit system usage. He stated that this difference would be covered on future slides.

MR. MILLS moved to slide 4, which showed a color-coded priority chart for reporting road conditions. Even though they use the same color-coding, he emphasized that the road conditions chart is different from the road maintenance prioritization map. He added that this chart helps to standardize the reporting on road conditions, and it should be used in conjunction with Alaska 511. He moved to slide 5, which showed a list of emergencies that staff have responded to over the last six months. He stated that these range from minor events to serious emergencies.

CO-CHAIR CARRICK questioned the Category A rating on the chart on slide 4, and she questioned whether maintaining a road in Fairbanks as bare pavement in the winter would be feasible.

MR. MILLS responded that conditions in the state vary, and bare pavement would be feasible in many parts of Alaska, such as in Juneau. He discussed some anti-icing and de-icing techniques that could lead to bare and dry pavement in the winter.

CO-CHAIR CARRICK questioned the cost of achieving this Category A rating in Fairbanks, and she suggested that these same road

conditions would have a Category B rating or Category C rating in Juneau. She suggested that some roads should not be maintained to have a Category A rating.

MR. MILLS acknowledged that a Category A rating for road conditions would not be achievable during certain times in the winter, and he expressed the understanding that the department would not sacrifice other roads to achieve this.

CO-CHAIR CARRICK commented on the road conditions in Fairbanks during severe weather events.

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BRAD BYLSMA, Director, State Equipment Fleet (SEF), Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet." He stated that SEF includes around 125 mechanics and 51 maintenance shops, as seen on slide 6. He stated that SEF manages around 7,500 pieces of equipment for all the state agencies. He explained that during the winter months SEF's main focus would be the 500 pieces of snow removal equipment for the highways and the 500 pieces of equipment for the rural airports.

MR. BYLSMA, in response to a question from Representative Mina concerning the funding, stated that the fleet falls under the Results Delivery Unit in the governor's budget, so it would receive both an operating and a capital appropriation.

MR. BYLSMA moved to slide 7, which displayed a table of the mechanic positions across the state and the corresponding vacancy rates in each district. He pointed out that the vacancy rates are higher for the heavy-duty mechanic positions, with some reaching up to 50 percent. He explained that this detracts from DOT&PF's ability to maintain equipment.

CO-CHAIR EISCHEID pointed out Anchorage's 50 percent vacancy rate in comparison with other districts. He questioned why Matanuska-Susitna Valley and Tok have no heavy-duty mechanic vacancies.

MR. BYLSMA responded that the answer is multifaceted. He pointed out that many heavy-duty mechanics reside in the Valley, so they tend to fill those openings. He noted that resources could be transferred to Anchorage. Concerning the low vacancy rate in Tok, he stated that he would follow up after the meeting with an answer. He added that this also concerns the operators,

and operator issues would be discussed later in the presentation. In response to a follow-up from Representative Moore concerning salary-related issues for the vacancy rates, he stated that there is a statewide salary study, but the department is unable to comment on the study at this time. He expressed the understanding that the compensation package for state mechanics is lower than what is provided in the private sector. He expressed the understanding that there is a shortage of qualified mechanics nationwide.

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MR. BYLSMA moved to slide 8 and discussed the department's strategy concerning mechanic vacancies. He stated that the department is using more private sector shops and dealerships to maintain state equipment. Because of the vacancy rates, he noted that the cost of using contracted maintenance has risen over the last four years, as seen on the slide. He added that this specialized maintenance can be more efficient.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA questioned the comparison between the money spent on contracting versus increasing wages in the department.

MR. BYLSMA responded that the department balances the immediate need, as time is critical for winter road maintenance. He pointed out that it might be slightly more expensive to go through a contractor, but the repairs are done in a shorter amount of time. However, he added that this is not always the case, reiterating that the need for contractors is determined on a case-by-case basis for efficiency and cost savings.

MR. BYLSMA, in response to a question from Co-Chair Eischeid concerning the department's equipment allotment, stated that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the department could order the trucks as needed; however, manufacturers now have an allocation on the number they can supply per the number they can build. He spoke about the limitations this has created. In response to a question from Representative Moore, he explained that the state is not necessarily in a shortage, but aging vehicles have to be replaced. He deferred the question to the next presenter. Per the chart on the slide, he responded that, per appropriations approval, the department plans to order 30 plow trucks in the fiscal year 2026. He pointed out that yearly orders come in a constant flow.

MR. BYLSMA, in response to a question from Representative Tilton, responded that the useful life of a plow truck is

variable, depending on the climate and the number of roads it maintains. He added that a full plow truck could last around 10-to-15 years. He noted that some of a truck's components could be used for a second time. In response to a follow-up question, he stated that the backlog constantly changes with maintenance needs, and he suggested that 30 trucks would not be enough. He stated that he would follow up after the meeting with an exact number.

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JASON SAKALASKAS, Chief, Maintenance and Operations (M&O), Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet." On slide 10, he reiterated that DOT&PF's winter maintenance prioritization is public information; however, he pointed out that the department would refine individual plow routes to maximize efficiency and consistency, and he gave details. Based on the storm size, severity, and location, he said equipment operators would work overtime, and personnel could be moved to help in areas with vacancy issues. He stated that specialized funding has also been used for contractors.

MR. SAKALASKAS discussed the key factors in storm response. Concerning equipment availability, he stated that this is always changing, so answers could "be vague." He stated that some of the factors that affect storm response include equipment downtime, the temperature trends and weather, traffic volumes, snow haul, and emergency calls. He noted that the National Weather Service is extremely important to the department.

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MR. SAKALASKAS, in response to a question from Co-Chair Carrick concerning the prioritization for clearing major pedestrian pathways, said that this would be discussed in future slides. He noted that the department is working on mapping this priority from a pedestrian mindset. He stated that he would talk about the needed equipment in a future slide.

MR. SAKALASKAS moved to slide 11, which displayed the vacancy rates of the department's winter operators across the state. He noted the decrease in vacancies across the board over the last year. He pointed out that the equipment operators have had a renegotiated union contract, which includes pay raises. He reiterated that vacancy rates depend on the region. He

discussed some of the strategies that the department is using to fill positions, including offering flexible staffing schedules and career paths for those who need training.

REPRESENTATIVE MINA questioned the difference between the vacancy rate for mechanics in Anchorage and the vacancy rate for operators.

MR. SAKALASKAS deferred to Mr. Bylsma.

MR. BYLSMA explained that slide 7 refers to the number of total heavy-duty mechanics in the winter. He explained that while mechanics and operators are in the same bargaining unit, these would be different job classes.

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CO-CHAIR CARRICK questioned whether bonuses are offered as a recruitment tool.

MR. MILLS responded that this was not included in the new bargaining agreement, so it would not be immediately offered. He noted that this could be a possibility in the future. In response to a follow-up question, he reiterated that the operators do not have bonuses because this was not part of their new contract; however, he noted that the Alaska Marine Highway System would offer bonuses for recruitment.

CO-CHAIR CARRICK questioned whether heavy equipment mechanics would have a recruitment bonus. She also questioned the starting pay for state mechanics compared to those in the private sector.

MR. BYLSMA responded that there are no recruitment bonuses for heavy equipment mechanics. Per her second question, he responded that the mechanic's wage would only be part of a private sector's rate to maintain equipment. He continued that the department compares its labor rates to the private sector's rates to see which is the most economical. He added that the department's wage scale would be based on geographic differences and experience; however, he expressed the opinion that these wages would be lower than in the private sector.

CO-CHAIR CARRICK, for an example, questioned the starting wage for a heavy equipment mechanic in Anchorage versus one in Fairbanks.

MR. BYLSMA responded that he would follow up with the specifics after the meeting. He noted that each wage amount would be different per the geographic difference and cost of living.

MR. MILLS added that the same geographic differential has been used since around 2008. He explained that a comparison between the wage rates for contracted mechanics and state mechanics would be difficult because the contracted wage would include facility costs, and other variables. He emphasized the complexity of comparing the pay scales.

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MR. SAKALASKAS, in response to a question from Representative Moore, stated that the rise in vacancy rates in Valdez resulted from individuals retiring and others moving to higher paying jobs. He stated that the department is addressing this staff shortage by sharing operators across districts and allowing for schedule variations. He noted that in these situations, staff would be paid overtime. In response to a follow-up question, he stated that if recruitment trends do not improve, bonuses would be a consideration.

MR. MILLS, in response to a request from Co-Chair Eischeid, stated that Mr. Bylsma would provide the data on starting wages for heavy-duty mechanics in the state. He added that he would follow up after the meeting with the data on the wages for heavy-duty mechanics in the private sector.

MR. SAKALASKAS spoke to the department's efforts on efficiencies in collaboration with other agencies. On slide 12, he pointed out several of these entities, noting that this collaboration normally occurs in urban locations with boroughs and city entities. Concerning delivering services to priority level 3 and priority level 4 roadways in severe storms, he said that the department has received special allocation funding to use contractors to perform this work. He stated that this funding helps, as the department would be able to guarantee contracts early. He noted that this would also help with contracts on pedestrian pathways.

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BURRELL NICKERSON, Manager, Maintenance and Operations, Central Region, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, in response to a question from Representative Mina, stated that he

would follow up with more details on the Municipality of Anchorage's winter Transfer of Responsibilities Agreement.

MR. SAKALASKAS moved to slide 13 and discussed M&O for the 237 airports in the state. He discussed the maintenance on rural airports, pointing out that these airports would hire contractors, as they do not have state personnel. He stated that the cost averages around \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year per airport. He expressed the understanding that contracts would be the most efficient way to do year-round maintenance in rural areas. He moved to slide 14 and spoke to two recent emergencies at Thompson Pass, and he described the exemplary response by the maintenance station there.

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MR. NICKERSON co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet." On slide 15, he pointed out the map that showed sidewalk plowing priority in Anchorage. He acknowledged that the map was the result from a discussion on the priority of winter road and sidewalk plowing. He discussed the use of contractors in Anchorage for rapid response in the winter. He noted that this would be used for roads with priority level 3 and priority level 4. He added that Anchorage has been "well served" by these rapid response contractors. He noted that in the department's Central Region, there are around 20 contracts for this year. He stated that when the contractors are not needed, they would still receive a monthly payment. In response to a question from Representative Mina concerning the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and access, he said that M&O would collaborate with the Municipality of Anchorage, as there would be a separate unit to clear bus stops from snow, ensuring ADA accessibility. He expressed the understanding that this collaboration is going well.

MR. NICKERSON moved to slide 16, which displayed graphs on the snowfall levels in Anchorage for the past four years. Concerning emergencies that DOT&PF responds to, he moved to slide 17 and discussed the erosion on the Homer Spit caused by storms. He stated that M&O, along with the City of Homer, identified the problem and shut down the road. He stated that a contractor was brought in for the repair. He noted that the governor declared this an emergency, and the problem was addressed quickly. He moved to slide 18 and discussed the collapse of the Rabbit Creek Pedestrian Bridge, and DOT&PF's response. He stated that during a wind event, the walls and roof collapsed, and this closed the road. He stated that in

response DOT&PF worked closely with the school district to close off the area. He estimated the time and cost for this repair.

2:49:26 PM

CHRISTINE LANGLEY, Director, Data Modernization, and Innovation Office (DMIO), Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, co-presented the PowerPoint, titled "Winter Snow Operations and State Equipment Fleet." She stated that DMIO was created a year ago, and in the upcoming fiscal year, it would be a DOT&PF division. On slide 19, she pointed out the avalanche data for the 2024 calendar year, and she noted that the state is bringing data together to better understand what is affecting Alaskans statewide. She listed the groups within DMIO, as follows: Traffic and Safety Engineering and Operations, Research and Innovation, Transportation Data, and Asset Management and Reporting. She explained the goals of each group, as seen on the slide.

MS. LANGLEY moved to slide 20 and further discussed how the department is working to bring together data from different departments. She noted that the state collects a "wealth" of information on avalanche reporting, real-time weather conditions, the ongoing analysis of the state's roadways, and the state's assets. She explained that this data is being used with new tools that would support the department and the public. On slide 21, she discussed some of the new tools. She drew attention to how data is being used to create the sidewalk priority map, and she discussed the difference between the priority of roads versus the priority of pedestrian pathways in specific instances. Also shown on the slide, she discussed the Winter Operations Dashboard tool, which displays where plows are working and how they are handling the conditions. She pointed out that this tool also shows current weather conditions compared with the past two years. She added that this tool allows M&O staff to track its resources. She noted the panel on the bottom of the slide, which showed a map of winter maintenance by district. She stated that this tool would help the public understand the local snow maintenance routes.

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MS. LANGLEY moved to slide 22 and discussed the tool that helps the department with the goal of increased transparency and reporting. She pointed out a more detailed look at the Winter Operations Dashboard. She noted the quick response (QR) code that allows for real-time access to roadway priority levels and

plow equipment locations. She emphasized the importance of sharing crash reporting to the public. She pointed out the Sidewalk Priority Level mapping tool that currently includes Anchorage and Fairbanks. She stated that this tool is still being developed for the public. She pointed out the Crash Reporting tool that is also still in the process of being developed. She noted the Performance Scorecard tool, which has a QR code that links to the department's federal performance reporting.

MS. LANGLEY moved to slide 23 and discussed Alaska 511. She noted that 399,000 people have used this tool, as it reports on the conditions of the state's roads. She stated that this site shares unplanned and planned events. She pointed out that the tool is used in cooperation with law enforcement. On the bottom of the slide, she explained a pilot program in Fairbanks that gives audio alerts to users about upcoming school buses and maintenance vehicles on the road system. She noted the interactive map on the 511 tool, which displays where plows have been throughout the day.

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CO-CHAIR EISCHEID announced that the presentation would be paused until a later date.

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REPRESENTATIVE TILTON expressed appreciation to DOT&PF for contracting with the private sector and having this partnership.

CO-CHAIR EISCHEID expressed the interest to further discuss brine and salt usage on the roadways. He pointed out that road plowing was one of the top public issues in Anchorage, and this topic needs a further conversation. He expressed appreciation to the presenters, and he made closing comments.

[3:09:40 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 3:09 p.m.