

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE

February 20, 2025

1:33 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Jesse Bjorkman, Chair
Senator Löki Tobin, Vice Chair
Senator Jesse Kiehl
Senator Bert Stedman
Senator Mike Shower

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S) : WINTER ROAD MAINTENANCE

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

ANDY MILLS, Special Assistant
Commissioner's Office
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented Winter Road Maintenance.

BURRELL NICKESON, Manager
Maintenance and Operations
Central Region
Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented Winter Road Maintenance

JASON SAKALASKAS, Maintenance and Operations Chief
Northern Region
Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented Winter Road Maintenance.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented Winter Road Maintenance.

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

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented Winter Road Maintenance.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:33:17 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN called the Senate Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:33 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Tobin, Kiehl and Chair Bjorkman. Senators Shower and Stedman arrived shortly thereafter.

PRESENTATION(S) : WINTER ROAD MAINTENANCE

[1:33:58 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN announced the presentation Winter Road Maintenance by Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF).

[1:34:57 PM](#)

ANDY MILLS, Special Assistant, Commissioner's Office, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), Juneau, Alaska, gave a brief overview of the presentation.

[1:36:17 PM](#)

MR. MILLS advanced to Slide 2 and discussed DOTPF maintenance and operations. He noted that there are 11,894 lane miles and 80 maintenance shops across the state.

[1:36:27 PM](#)

SENATOR SHOWER joined the meeting.

MR. MILLS continued his discussion of Slide 2. He commented that Alaska is lacking in infrastructure, particularly in remote locations. He briefly discussed the ways DOTPF maintenance and operations facilities are used by Alaskans, including as shelter from winter storms. He noted that Starlink technology

initiatives are underway for areas where no other method of communication is available.

[1:37:50 PM](#)

MR. MILLS advanced to Slide 3 and discussed winter road maintenance priorities:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Road Priority Map

In 2022, DOT&PF reported, pursuant to legislative intent language, on how the department establishes and reviews winter road maintenance priorities.

[1:38:06 PM](#)

SENATOR STEDMAN joined the meeting.

MR. MILLS continued his discussion of Slide 3. He offered to provide the committee with a copy of the report presented in 2022. He briefly discussed the variables considered when determining winter road maintenance priority. Road type is the primary consideration. Route efficiency is also a consideration.

[1:40:57 PM](#)

MR. MILLS advanced to Slide 4 and emphasized the importance of maintenance and operations at airports across the state:

Maintenance and Operations - Aviation

237 Airports
2 International
235 Rural of which 26 are Part 139 Certified

Rural Airport Maintenance (RAM) Contracts
Average \$50.0 - \$100.0 per airport

~82 percent of communities in Alaska rely on aviation as their only means of access

[1:42:52 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN requested data related to the attrition rates among DOT employees from 2001 to present.

[1:43:27 PM](#)

MR. MILLS said he previously looked at the previous ten years and did not see significant reductions at that time. Instead, he

noticed an increase in overtime. He offered to investigate this timeframe and report back.

[1:44:17 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN explained that her question is related to the issue of employee retention as more long-term employees reach retirement age, especially considering the changes to retirement benefits for new employees.

[1:44:38 PM](#)

SENATOR STEDMAN asked about salary increases to retain or attract operators and mechanics.

[1:45:16 PM](#)

MR. MILLS shared his understanding that a recent contract resulted in a 14 or 15 percent salary increase. He offered to get back to the committee with additional information.

[1:45:46 PM](#)

SENATOR SHOWER directed attention to education spending and career and technical education (CTE). He requested data showing DOTPF's CTE needs.

[1:46:28 PM](#)

MR. MILLS noted a recent project in Hughes that trained students and emphasized the possibilities for remote areas of the state. He said he would provide additional training data to the committee.

[1:47:23 PM](#)

MR. MILLS advanced to Slide 5 and discussed the winter road condition index:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Winter Operations

Category A: Good Winter Driving Conditions

- Bare pavement, good visibility, snow removed from lanes and centerline, acceptable path widths

Category B: Fair to Good Winter Driving Conditions

- Some lane blockage, icy patches, snow cleared from the traveled way, generally good traction

Category C: Fair to Difficult Winter Driving Conditions

- Passable roads, standing water or loose snow, patches may cover some lane markings, slow traffic movement

Category D: Difficult to Very Difficult Driving Conditions

- Challenging travel, moderate snow accumulation, substantial traffic delays

Category E: Hazardous Winter Driving Conditions

- Travel not advised, considerable snow accumulation, roads may be icy, poor traction, extremely poor conditions

[1:49:20 PM](#)

MR. MILLS advanced to Slide 6 and discussed emergency responses from July 2024 to January 2025. Slide 6 contains lists of monthly emergency response incidents during this timeframe. He emphasized that DOTPF addresses a variety of winter emergency incidents. He noted a recent Homer Spit storm and an incident in Ketchikan.

[1:51:11 PM](#)

BURRELL NICKESON, Manager, Maintenance and Operations, Central Region, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), Anchorage, Alaska, advanced to Slide 7 and discussed the Homer Spit storm in 2024:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Homer Spit Storm Damage - November 16, 2024

Storm Impact

- Damaged by two storms
- High tides, strong winds, and high surf caused rocks, debris, and erosion

Emergency Response

- Homer Police & DOT&PF closed the road and issued public notifications
- Cleanup and repairs began immediately

Restoration Efforts

- Cleared debris and repaired roadway
- Placed riprap to reinforce the structural section
- Reopened to two-lane traffic after three weeks of repairs

[1:53:56 PM](#)

MR. NICKESON advanced to slide 8 and discussed DOTPF's response to the Rabbit Creek pedestrian bridge collapse in January 2025:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Rabbit Creek Pedestrian Bridge Response

January 12, 2025

Incident Overview

- 2:30 a.m. - DOTPF maintenance worker reported debris on Seward Highway
- DOTPF and Anchorage Police Department closed the roadway for safety

Response Actions

- Removed fallen decking and caging from the highway
- Used loaders and sweepers to clear debris
- Stationed personnel on-site to secure the area

Structural Assessment

- Bridge engineers inspected the superstructure
- Confirmed structurally sound and intact

MR. NICKESON noted that repair is expected to cost \$2-\$3 million. The bridge is currently closed; DOTPF has made every effort to ensure no one accesses the bridge until it is repaired.

[1:58:15 PM](#)

JASON SAKALASKAS, Maintenance and Operations Chief, Northern Region, Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, Fairbanks, Alaska, advanced to slide 9 and discussed DOTPF's response to Thompson Pass storms in January 2025:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Thompson Pass Response

January 11 and 26, 2025

January 11 Storm Impact

- Over 108 inches of snow accumulated
- Crews conducted avalanche control to ensure safety before reopening

Richardson Highway Milepost 18-46 Closure

- Closed: January 26

- Reopened: January 27
Snow and Avalanche Mitigation
- Cleared a naturally occurring avalanche (7-8 feet of snow)
- Continued plowing operations to restore full access

Two young Alaskans were stranded in the extreme conditions in Thompson Pass during the storm. Maintenance crews brought them to the camp for the night to ensure their safety.

"I want to thank whoever was driving the plow Cat that rescued my kid..."

MR. SAKALASKAS stated that the public was notified of the Richardson Highway closures via call lists and 511. He emphasized the importance of notifying the public of road closures in advance.

[2:02:55 PM](#)

MR. SAKALASKAS advanced to slide 10 and discussed avalanches and highway closures across the state, from January 1, 2024 to December 31, 2024. Slide 10 includes infographics with avalanche data and an image of a slide at that Parks Highway Milepost 219, Jan. 2025. From January 1 to December 31, 2024, there were 32 avalanche road impacts, 292 avalanche occurrences, and 383.9 total road closure hours. He noted that all areas of the state report to a central tracking mechanism. He pointed out that these road closures can have a large impact on goods and services and transportation.

[2:05:38 PM](#)

CHRISTINE LANGLEY, Director, Data Modernization and Innovation Office (DMIO), Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, Fairbanks, Alaska, advanced to slide 11 and discussed DOTPF's new Data Modernization and Innovation Office (DMIO):

[Original punctuation provided.]

Data Modernization and Innovation

Traffic and Safety Engineering & Operations

- Traffic Engineering
- Traveler Information

- Intelligent Transportation System
- Connected and Autonomous Vehicles
- Alaska Highway Safety Office

Research and Innovation

- Transportation Research
- Technology Transfer
- Workforce Development
- Process Improvement

Transportation Data

- Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
- AASHTOWare Project
- Data Analysis and Visualization

Asset Management and Reporting

- Bridge and Pavement Condition Reporting
- Highway Performance Monitoring
- Performance Management
- Traffic Volume Monitoring

[2:09:21 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN expressed interest in civil rights complaint data but said she was unable to find it. She asked where this could be found. She wondered if DOTPF would make this information available.

[2:10:05 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY replied yes. She indicated that this information is a part of the AASHTOWare reporting tool. This data is provided in coordination with the DOTPF civil rights office. Additional data will be available in the future and specific data could be provided at the Senator's request.

[2:11:00 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN stated that this information is helpful for those involved in efforts to reconnect communities. She surmised that DOTPF is working to provide the public with more information.

[2:11:26 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY affirmed that this is correct.

[2:11:33 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN said her constituents have asked about the creation of DMIO. She noted that DMIO was formed 1.5 years ago.

She surmised that this office was created by reclassifying positions, rather than with a budget request. She asked how many positions were reclassified and how many employees the office currently has.

[2:11:54 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY clarified that DMIO was an idea in DOTPF for 1.5 years. DMIO became an official budget component during the current fiscal year. She said DMIO currently has 52 positions and 6 vacancies. She explained that DMIO is an aggregation of sections throughout DOTPF. Some positions were reclassified, but many individuals were already within the department. She offered examples of the positions that transitioned into DMIO.

[2:13:01 PM](#)

MR. MILLS added that 4 years ago, DOTPF began to consider bringing a data scientist onboard and this evolved into DMIO.

[2:13:45 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN asked how many of the 52 positions were regional positions that transitioned to statewide positions. She expressed concern that regional communities may have lost access to local expertise.

[2:14:11 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY said she could provide this information. She said that the majority of the positions were already statewide. Some regional positions were expanded to have statewide impact, thus maintaining local access.

[2:14:49 PM](#)

MR. MILLS explained that many DOTPF initiatives have repurposed position control numbers (PCN) with vacancies over 18 months.

[2:15:37 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN asked about DMIO's supervisor structure.

[2:15:54 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY said that her position reports to the Deputy Commissioner, who reports to the Commissioner.

[2:16:05 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY advanced to Slide 12 and discussed how DMIO analyzes sidewalk vs road priority. Slide 12 contains several Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF) winter sidewalk priority maps and a QR code for additional information. She briefly described the process used to determine reasons for

sidewalk priority and whether sidewalk priority should differ from roadway priority. She commented that this has been a useful process and offered examples.

[2:18:41 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN drew attention to the Gambell-Ingra corridor in the Fairview neighborhood in Anchorage, where many pedestrian deaths have occurred. She pointed out that in many cases, pedestrians are forced to walk in the roadway after heavy snow events because sidewalks have not been cleared. She questioned whether 48 hours is a reasonable timeframe for clearing sidewalks in areas with heavy pedestrian traffic (as indicated on the graphics on Slide 12).

[2:19:24 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY differed the question.

MR. MILLS replied that snow storage is one issue and makes clearing sidewalks difficult. DOTPF is working to procure additional tools to aid sidewalk clearing. He explained how road priority is determined and emphasized the importance of communication with residents.

[2:21:34 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN expressed appreciation for this. She said that the community of Fairview recently created a group - the Fairview Snowfighters - to clear the sidewalks and keep residents safe. She noted that money for Northwood snow disposal was recently vetoed by the governor and asked whether DOTPF supported that veto. She surmised that DOTPF needed that snow storage site.

[2:22:05 PM](#)

MR. MILLS replied that DOTPF is considering several locations for snow storage and certain locations require additional preparation. He indicated that he did not know the details behind the veto and that DOTPF had not made a firm decision regarding that location. Snow storage is part of the Complete Streets policy.

[2:23:07 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN said she would like to discuss this further. She noted that previous budget agreements related to snow plowing and removal in Anchorage were not kept.

[2:23:28 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY advanced to Slide 13 and discussed the winter operations dashboard. The dashboard has three components:

internal fleet management, the public dashboard, and 511 - audible alerting. She briefly described these components and offered examples to illustrate their function and usefulness.

[2:27:14 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY advanced to Slide 14 and discussed 511, which provides roadway-related information to the public. There are 399,000 active users, with nearly 1 million total sessions. 152 incidents, events, and conditions were posted to 511 along with 504 roadwork events. DOTPF coordinates with Canada to cross-display conditions to aid commerce transport from the Lower 48 to Alaska. 511 is used by community members and other state departments, including the Department of Public Safety (DPS) and the Division of Alaska State Troopers. 511 also provides school bus and bridge height information.

[2:30:11 PM](#)

MS. LANGLEY advanced to slide 15 and discussed future DPIO enhancements:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Future Enhancements

Enhancing Real-Time Data Collection

- Mobile Road Weather Information Systems - Improved monitoring of conditions
- Traffic Condition & Movement Tracking - Increased situational awareness
- Avalanche Detection & Mitigation - Proactive safety measures
- Smart Work Zones - Optimized traffic flow & worker safety

Key Objectives

- Real-Time Decision Making - Faster, data-driven responses
- Automated Alerting- Streamlined information sharing
- Advanced Traffic Management System - Coordinated statewide efforts
- Joint Operations Center - Unified emergency and traffic management

Goal: A Safer & More Reliable Transportation System for Alaska

[2:32:18 PM](#)

MR. SAKALASKAS advanced to slide 16 and discussed storm event response:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Responses are Adaptable to Severity of Storm

- Roadways are plowed based on statewide roadway priorities and further refined into individual plow routes to maximize efficiency and consistency
- Contractors, overtime, and shared personnel are utilized to adjust responses based on storm size, severity, and location

Key Factors in Storm Response

- Equipment availability (downtime impacts response)
- Type and rate of precipitation, asphalt temperatures, wind, and duration
- Temperature trends before, during, and after the event
- Traffic volumes affecting plowing operations
- Snow haul sites availability for clearing
- Emergency calls impacting resource allocation

[2:34:51 PM](#)

MR. SAKALASKAS continued with his discussion of Slide 16. He explained the key factors in storm response and offered examples.

[2:37:38 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN expressed appreciation for the work DOTPF does to clear winter roadways in the Northern region. She directed attention to intent language in the 2024 budget related to moving away from reliance on contractors and toward reliance on department staff. She shared her understanding that DOTPF plans to disregard this language and continue to rely on contractors. She asked whether DOTPF plans to provide updated language around this issue.

[2:38:40 PM](#)

MR. SAKALASKAS deferred the question.

MR. MILLS responded that he was involved in conversations related to this issue. He explained that the intent language in question was specific to the Anchorage area. The appropriations for this were vetoed by the governor. He explained the FY 2025 supplemental contracts, which DOTPF uses when additional resources are needed. He shared his understanding of the intent language. He emphasized that DOTPF's MO is the core resource, and the supplemental contracts are only utilized when and where it is necessary.

[2:40:38 PM](#)

SENATOR TOBIN noted that other individuals involved in discussions have indicated a different interpretation. She suggested a conversation to follow-up on this issue.

[2:40:53 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN shared various reports from constituents who observed DOTPF clearing roads when it seemed unnecessary. He asked about decisions to clear snow in these instances.

[2:42:18 PM](#)

MR. MILLS replied that each situation is unique and determining factors vary. He pointed out that, while weather improvements may be forecast, there is always a degree of uncertainty. He opined that no snow or warmer weather in the forecast is not a reason to put off snow removal in the present. He added that, without specific examples, it is difficult to explain resources and reasoning. He offered an example to illustrate how an outside perspective may not be an accurate interpretation of events.

[2:44:10 PM](#)

MR. MILLS advanced to Slide 17 and discussed variable snowfall requires variable response. Slide 17 contains 4 graphs displaying [Anchorage] snowfall data for 2021-2025. He noted recent record snowfall events. This data is useful in preparing for future weather events. He emphasized that the weather is variable, and it is impossible to determine future weather with certainty. He reiterated that contractors are used when extra resources are needed.

[2:48:22 PM](#)

MR. SAKALASKAS advanced to Slide 18 and discussed winter operations staffing. Slide 18 contains a chart displaying data on statewide maintenance districts, total equipment operator positions, and vacancy rates between January 29, 2024 and February 3, 2025. He contrasted areas of improved staffing

levels with those where staffing levels remain a challenge. There has been an overall decrease in equipment operator vacancies statewide; however, challenges remain. He provided examples to illustrate how DOTPF is addressing these vacancies, including contracting and overtime.

[2:51:06 PM](#)

MR. SAKALASKAS advanced to slide 19 and discussed partnerships and other resources:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Partnerships and Other Resources

Collaborative Efforts Across Alaska

- City of Fairbanks - Roadway responsibility swaps for improved maintenance
- Municipality of Anchorage - Transfer of Responsibility Agreement (TORA)
- City and Borough of Juneau - Enhanced priority for Fish Creek Road
- ROW Trespass Agreement Assistance - Resolving Right-of-Way issues efficiently
- Signalization Work - Optimizing traffic signals to enhance resource sharing

Contract Support for Winter Operations

- Fairbanks - Priority 3 and 4 roads (4th year of contract support)
- Fairbanks - Pedestrian facility maintenance & snow haul trucking
- DNR Support - Clearing downed trees and snow removal
- Anchorage - Addressing Priority 3 and 4 roads (2nd year of contract support)
- Anchorage - Expanding sidewalk maintenance
- Juneau - Partnering with City and Borough of Juneau to improve pedestrian access
- Emergency Assistance - Contractor support for heavy storms

[2:54:01 PM](#)

BRAD BYLSMA, State Equipment Fleet Manager, Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, Anchorage, Alaska, advanced to slide 20 and discussed the state equipment fleet:

[Original punctuation provided.]

State Equipment Fleet

51 Maintenance Shops Statewide

125 Mechanic Positions

Over 7,500 pieces of state equipment and vehicles

- Executive branch
- University of Alaska
- Other state agencies

Primary Focus October-March: Snow and Ice Removal
Equipment

[2:55:22 PM](#)

MR. BYLSMA advanced to slide 21 and discussed equipment mechanic staffing. Slide 21 contains a chart displaying data on various maintenance districts, heavy equipment mechanic positions, and vacancies for 2024 and 2025. He noted that the vacancy rates have increased overall. Some individual districts have high vacancy rates.

[2:56:36 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL asked what techniques and tools DOTPF is using to keep the heavy equipment on the road in light of the high vacancy rates for heavy equipment mechanic positions.

[2:56:48 PM](#)

MR. BYLSMA asked to hear the question again.

[2:56:55 PM](#)

SENATOR KIEHL repeated the question.

[2:57:08 PM](#)

MR. BYLSMA said that DOTPF moves resources to different regions and operators may assist with equipment maintenance when available. He added that partnerships also help.

[2:58:05 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN said that he has heard that it can be difficult to receive approval for equipment repair and asked for more information.

[2:58:42 PM](#)

MR. BYLSMA said he is unable to provide a specific answer; however, he stated that getting approval for repairs is not an issue. He explained that there is a dedicated staff and

processes are in place to ensure that equipment remains available and on the road. He suggested that the issue might be related to funding and said he could look into this and provide additional information.

[2:59:31 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN shared his understanding that some individuals feel there are administrative constraints related to local resources. He indicated that this is a funding issue and offered examples. He commented that some individuals may feel frustrated with what they perceive to be a misuse of funds. He suggested that the next presentation could address these issues.

[3:01:09 PM](#)

MR. MILLS agreed to return and discuss this and other issues at the committee's request.

[3:01:16 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN said he would also like to address Seward Highway maintenance and other issues.

[3:01:34 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Bjorkman adjourned the Senate Transportation Standing Committee meeting at 3:01 p.m.