Sustainability Corner

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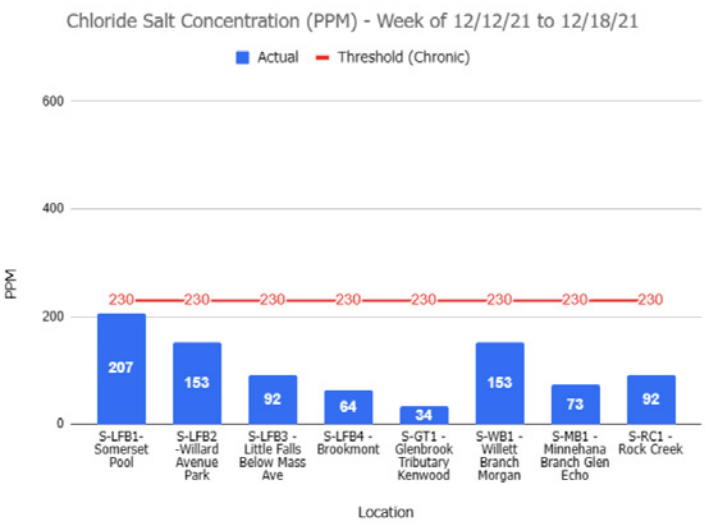
Too Much Salt: Somerset Needs to Rethink Its Road Treatment Policy

Urban streams like Little Falls Branch have it tough in the winter. As usual, the culprit is us. Because it is safer to have clear streets free of ice and snow, the people who plow also put down salt — in huge quantities. As soon as snow and ice melt, much of that salt ends up in the creek where it is toxic to the fresh water organisms. According to the WSSC, "it only takes one teaspoon of salt to pollute 5 gallons of water to a level that is toxic to fresh water ecosystems." The salt also ends up in our drinking water, which pulls from the Potomac River. In the last few years, the level of salt in the water entering WSSC filtration plants has increased steadily.

To document the effect of road salts on salt levels in local waterways, the Little Falls Watershed Alliance (LFWA) has been testing sites along Little Falls and other creeks in the watershed. They have run tests before and after it snows. What they found is that the baseline for the creek where it passes through Somerset is already nearing toxic levels; after the January 5th storm, it rose above toxicity, from a baseline of 203 parts-per-million (ppm) of salt to over 440 ppm. According to the EPA, 230 ppm is "chronic" (as shown in the graph) and thus toxic to aquatic life. Moreover, as the LFWA figure below shows, salt levels near the Somerset Pool prior to any snow events exceed levels found in the rest of the Little Falls watershed, including the Willett Branch which receives stormwater from downtown Bethesda.



How does the salt get into the waterways? It doesn't go away when the snow and ice melt. It travels with stormwater down the storm drains directly into streams and drinking water reservoirs. Excess salt on grass seeps into the ground and contaminates the ground water, which in turn feeds the creek. This seepage also leads to salt contamination of wells, a growing problem.

What can the Town and individuals do to keep salt out of our waterways?

First and foremost, be salt-wise. Use only what is needed and sweep up the excess after the storm. It can be used again. It doesn't take much to de-ice a 10-square sidewalk — only 12 ounces or a coffee cup full. Alternatively, if possible just use a shovel and no salt!

Second, the Town should consider alternative de-icing treatments. Other towns in the area, such as Martin's Addition and Garrett Park, use brine or sand instead of salt.

Third, if the Town chooses to continue to use salt, the Town should ensure that contractors follow Maryland State guidelines for road treatment and salt dispersal.

Given the current salt level in the Little Falls Branch and in our groundwater, we need to stop endangering drinking water supplies and water quality, and begin to rethink our road treatment policies.

Have questions? Please contact the Environment Committee at: ***tos.environmentcommittee@gmail.com***.