

Testimony of Allen D. Biehler, Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

Before the Joint Hearing of the Senate Transportation Committee and Senate Veterans
Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee

Winter Operations Preparedness
October 30, 2007

I am here today to update you on the progress PennDOT has made since last winter taking the needed steps to restore public confidence in our snow removal capabilities.

Last Valentine's Day was a difficult and unusual storm.

Most of PennDOT's Districts followed procedures and were able to handle the storm without disrupting or stranding customers.

In central and northeastern Pennsylvania, we had particularly tough weather conditions and some of our locations, were not successful.

We have spent a lot of time studying what went wrong in the Valentine's Day storm.

With the benefit of the overview provided by James Lee Witt and Associates and our own reviews, we know that there were gaps in applying our basic snow and ice control procedures. We have made numerous changes to both close our gaps and increase our capabilities to insure we are properly prepared.

I will describe our progress which I have grouped under four categories:

- *Management and Staffing*
- *Technology*
- *Preparation and Communications*
- *And Multi-Agency Cooperation*

1. Management and Staffing

Problem Last Winter:

We had variability in application of schedules, staffing and management.

We were not able to provide consistent levels of service around the clock. We were too heavy in daylight operations and too sparse at night. We didn't cover the entire storm.

That will not happen again.

Response:

There will be 24/7 coverage capability on all our roadways for which we are responsible. We created a preparedness template which we used in reviews this summer with our managers in all 67 counties and we are verifying it. We will have our snow operator shifts properly staffed.

We have reemphasized the interstate system as our top priority.

We have adopted a command and control process, as the Witt report recommended, that follows the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS). We have created an all hazards Emergency Transportation Operations Guidebook, which supports the Incident Command Structure.

We have moved to a higher pay scale for temporary winter operators in certain regions of the state which is helping us attract more new recruits. We did this in our Districts based in Northeastern Pennsylvania, the Lehigh Valley, southeastern and south central Pennsylvania and Allegheny County.

While our Maintenance Efficiency and Cost Effectiveness (MECE) initiatives regarding numbers of trucks were confirmed as the right way to go to manage our resources – we also recognize there may be some extenuating circumstances for which we need flexibility. Where districts believe there is a need, they now have the ability to have contingency rental trucks at 10 percent above their recommended numbers to increase capability on non-interstate routes during intense snow events.

The Deputy Secretary for Highway Administration has established a process to confirm winter maintenance readiness of acting county maintenance managers before allowing that person to run the county operation during winter.

2. Technology

Problem Last Winter:

Last winter, only 19 of 74 Roadway Weather Information System (RWIS) sites were operational.

This technology system was not aligned to support situational awareness.

Response:

The Roadway Weather Information System (RWIS) was intended as one tool to help managers make judgments about winter services; this has evolved into a component of an overall travelers' information system. We are testing next generation technology for this system. In the meantime, we have made progress on the readiness of the existing system. Roughly 70 of the RWIS sites are now operational.

RWIS information will assist in our situational awareness, however our Roadway Condition Reporting System will serve as our base condition information. Continuous reports from our operators and field personnel during snow events will feed the Roadway Condition Reporting System.

We have now tied the Roadway Condition Reporting System directly to the Interstate hotline. The new link automatically converts data to a voice message.

We have also upgraded our web site, with a separate area for the public to access traveler information. In addition, we are moving to expanded web sharing capability of our closed circuit TV cameras. Steps are being taken to increase the number of cameras and make our existing cameras more accessible to our command and control team and to the public.

We are piloting automated vehicle locators in our trucks (in Districts 5 and 8), which will improve our situational awareness capability and our ability to redirect our resources if necessary.

Our people working in our Transportation Communications Center in Harrisburg will be able to see three sets of information on conditions during winter weather events: our own Roadway Condition Reporting System, the State Police incident reporting system, and PEMA's Emergency Management incident reports from 911 centers across the state.

3. Preparedness and Communications

Problem Last Winter:

Last winter we were not uniformly prepared to operate at peak performance in all areas of Pennsylvania.

We were not subscribed to a standard weather forecasting service for the entire state.

We were not providing motorists with accurate roadway condition information.

Emergency response capability was not in place for the I-78 corridor.

Response:

We have implemented a winter **preparedness** review process through the use of a standard template. This Quality Assurance/Quality Control process has been used to insure our state of readiness. We have participated in multi-agency exercises and conducted internal preparedness drills.

We have contracted with a weather forecasting service to provide automatic notification of approaching storms to PennDOT Districts throughout Pennsylvania.

We have scanned for best winter practices being used by some of the larger snow states.

We have re-emphasized with our staff that interstates are the top priority.

As a result, all of our interstates will be treated with pre-wetted salt. We will also be putting additional emphasis on anti-icing.

We established incentives to attract more truck rental equipment to state service. These include fuel escalation clauses and other price incentives.

To enhance communication with the public, we have created 4 levels of reporting:

- 1) Field staff will be supplying situational awareness to feed the Roadway Condition Reporting System that, in turn, will automatically feed to the Interstate hotline.
- 2) RCRS will provide each District's Incident Command Center with information that can be used to communicate to the public through Variable Message Signs, Highway Advisory Radios and News Releases.
- 3) We also have a statewide Transportation Communications Center located in Harrisburg that will be utilized to manage statewide information during a significant snow storm. Our RCRS data along with PSP and PEMA's system information will be reviewed and coordinated with the appropriate District or Districts. This cross-check information is the situational awareness that will be used to communicate to the media and the public.
- 4) The State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), overseen by PEMA, will provide media releases at a more global level.

We have integrated a Public Information Officer into each Incident Command Center to ensure information is accurate before being released to the public.

We have established six common descriptors consistent with ICS that will help our people accurately and quickly describe conditions and help people understand them quickly:

- Condition 1, clear and dry
- Condition 2, clear and wet
- Condition 3, Snow and or slush covered with wheel tracks exposed, accumulations up to two inches.
- Condition 4, Snow and/or slush covered, with areas of packed snow on the roadway.
- Condition 5, icy, with pavement completely covered by packed snow and or ice.

- Condition 6, impassable, due to drifting snow, excessive unplowed snow, glare ice, crashes, stuck or abandoned vehicles.

Our winter operators and maintenance teams have been trained in the use of these terms.

Whenever the SEOC is activated, we have arranged for the stand up of the 1-800-Visit-PA call center as a storm information center, where the public can talk to a live person.

Special focus has been put on Interstate 78 in the form of short and intermediate term enhancements.

Short term enhancements to be completed by December 2007 include:

- Contracting with local rental service to provide tow trucks within Berks County for removal of incapacitated vehicles.
- Placement of portable remote control closed circuit TV cameras at mileposts 10, 19, 29, 35 and 40.
- Placement of portable variable message signs at eastbound mileposts 10, 14, 27 and 42 plus westbound mileposts 42, 27 and 19.
- Increased frequency of snow operations between Lenhartsville and Krumsville (milepost 35 to 40).
- Establishment of highway advisory radio coverage in Berks County.
- Enhanced signing of detour routes.

Intermediate enhancements to be completed by Fall 2009 include:

- Adding permanent variable message signs, highway advisory radios and closed circuit TV cameras.
- Installation of median barrier gates.
- Widening of shoulders between approximately milepost 35 and 43.
- Construction of emergency access points.

4. Multi Agency Cooperation

Problem Last Winter:

We did not have access to all of our information at the State Emergency Operations Center.

Standard emergency management command and control policies and procedures were not in place.

We did not have clear agency roles and responsibilities for closure of interstate routes.

Response:

A new data link has been created between PennDOT and the State Emergency Operations Center in order for us to access all pertinent information during winter weather events.