



WorkSafeBC industry specialist Kevin Bennett keeps a careful eye on the changing conditions of a snowy drive.

Bracing for winter

By Lucy Hyslop

From the extremes of massive snowdrifts on mountain passes to rain, snow, fog banks, fewer daylight hours, and the threat of black ice lurking under the wheel, B.C. is almost guaranteed to whip up adverse weather conditions to challenge most journeys.

From fall to early winter, B.C. sees an alarming spike in the number of motor vehicle incidents. The common cause? Driving too fast for road conditions. On average, the number of incidents nearly doubled across the province between October and December during 2010–2014 (from 114 to 222). Breaking that down by region, according to ICBC, the Southern Interior's

numbers rose fourfold from about 23 to 93; the Lower Mainland's increased from 51 to 59; Northern Central's, from 18 to 44; and Vancouver Island's went from about 22 to 26.

For commercial drivers and road maintenance workers, trying to prevent winter crashes begins before they hit the road. Drivers need to ensure that their vehicles are geared up correctly for this type of changeable weather and that they are physically and mentally prepared before they head off.

"People have crashes because all it takes is a little bit of an oversight or overestimation not only of one's abilities, perhaps, but also because they think the road is better than it is," explains Rick Viventi, director of

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health, safety, and environment for Kamloops-based Arrow Transportation Systems, which has 1,000 employees and 400 trucks hauling goods across North America. “Before you know it you’re off the road and you’ve hurt yourself or someone else. People must consider what could happen or you’re not going to behave according to the conditions.”

Viventi advises that, for all drivers, taking their foot off the accelerator is critically important. “People must slow down,” he stresses. “Regardless of what you are driving, you have to be smooth, methodical, and purposeful when steering and braking.”

Employers also have a role to play in road safety before their workers get out on the road, notes WorkSafeBC transportation industry specialist Kevin Bennett. If you supervise workers who drive a commercial truck, work van, or personal vehicle, says Bennett, ask yourself these questions, “Have you taken steps to ensure their safety, especially during the B.C. winter driving season? Are your workers familiar with the company driving policy, written safe work procedures, and working alone protocols? Have they received education and training on how to respond to winter driving conditions? Have they received guidance to check conditions before they travel?” Taking the time to address these issues before heading out on the road leaves workers better prepared for the variable conditions they may face.

The perils of overtaking snowplows

Road maintenance adds another element to the winter landscape. Despite the “Do Not Pass” warnings and flashing amber lights on plows (usually travelling at 60km/h), some drivers frequently overtake these vehicles and end up clipping the wing that can stick out two metres on either side of the plow.

“It’s insane to overtake a plow,” says Blair Barr, general manager of VSA Highway Maintenance Ltd. in Merritt. He cites “an unprecedented” 11 crashes in 2015 among

the 30 trucks the company runs on B.C. roads, including the Coquihalla Highway. “Sometimes you can’t see those attachments in the cloud of snow and in many cases drivers end up pushing us into the ditch and causing damage to themselves.”

Plows now often work in tandem to effectively block the road and prevent these types of manoeuvres. They typically pull over to allow traffic to pass every 10–15 kilometres. Kevin Bennett, points out that there needs to be patience for the workers who make roads safer for other users.

“Road maintenance plow operators are performing an important public service — at all hours — to keep highways open and safe for travel. Passing a plow puts you and the workers operating these vehicles at risk of a preventable and potentially serious crash.” Bennett adds, “Drivers should stay about 10 car lengths behind a plow.”

Overall, it is often the decisions made behind the wheel that get people home safely. “If you choose to make a poor decision, you can — and most times you will — get in trouble,” Viventi concludes. ☹



In winter driving conditions, you should keep a safe distance (at least four seconds) between you and other vehicles.

How employers can get winter ready

If you are an employer who requires workers to drive during winter, it's your responsibility to ensure the health and safety of those workers. Here are some tips on how you can be winter ready.

Prepare your workers

Where possible, promote alternatives to driving, such as email or videoconferencing and, where available, public transportation. When travel is necessary, follow these steps to reduce the risk of a motor vehicle incident:

- In adverse conditions, consider whether the journey can be postponed.
- Take time to plan the journey. Work out the safest time to drive, be mindful of fewer daylight hours, and identify the most suitable routes. And build in time for the likelihood of reduced speeds and delays. Have them check sites such as DriveBC (drivebc.ca) before starting their trip.
- Conditions can change quickly. Tell your workers to be alert during times when black ice can form, typically when temperatures fluctuate between +5° and -5° C. Educate your drivers to exercise caution and safely reduce speed when driving in shaded areas and on bridges and overpasses, which can freeze faster.
- Inform your drivers to follow messages posted on official fixed and digital highway signs, including the recently introduced variable speed limit signs.
- A regular posted speed limit is for ideal road conditions, so drivers have a duty to reduce their speed and drive according to the conditions. In winter, remind drivers to increase the distance between their vehicle and the vehicle in front.
- Advise your workers to be careful when driving in areas with pedestrian traffic.

- Educate your drivers to follow the “slow down move over” law when they encounter vehicles with flashing amber or blue and red lights.
- Drivers of passenger cars and light-duty trucks must share the road with commercial vehicles, which have long stopping distances. Make sure your drivers are aware of the blind spots on these large vehicles, and instruct them to give commercial vehicles extra space, and never cut in front — they should only pass in front of a large truck when they see both of its headlights in their rear-view mirror.

Prepare your vehicles

- Make sure that your work vehicles are properly inspected and maintained.
- Properly inflated winter tires (identified by a mountain/snowflake symbol on the sidewall) or mud and snow tires in good condition are required for most B.C. highways between October 1 and March 31. Tires must have a minimum tread depth of at least 3.5 mm.
- If you operate commercial vehicles, check that the trucks are equipped with tire chains that are in good working order and that the driver has been trained to safely and correctly install them.
- Give your engine a pre-winter check-up, looking at such key parts as the belts, brakes, battery, exhaust, electrical, and cooling and heating systems.
- Make sure that before your driver leaves that snow and ice have been safely removed from the lights, windows, mirrors, and flat surfaces.

For more brochures, resources, tips, and other information on winter driving, see www.shiftintowinter.ca/driving-for-work/keeping-your-workers-safe.