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Season's heavy precipitation may require department to exceed budget for street coverage

Like other communities throughout southeastern Wisconsin, Grafton has been digging out from this week's blast of winter white.

But the village has also been facing another crunch this season — a prolific use of street salt.

Public Works Director Dave Murphy said that through January street crews had already used almost all the 1,100 tons of salt budgeted for the winter. That includes about 600 tons spread in December and nearly 500 tons in January.

"Our average is about 1,200 tons per winter, so we're way ahead of that pace already," Murphy said.

Although snowfall this winter hadn't been particularly heavy until this week, a large number of precipitation days in December, combined with freezing temperatures, had village crews treating the streets more than expected.

Salting is typically done to combat icy conditions and light snowfalls, but not before or during heavy snowstorms, Murphy said. Major thoroughfares and steep and curved roads receive the highest priorities.

"If it continues to snow, we just keep plowing," Murphy added. "Once it lets up, we'll use the salt as needed."

Most municipalities in Ozaukee County purchase street salt through the county. However, the village buys the bulk of its salt through the state's Department of Transportation, which purchases an allotment stored at Jones Island in Milwaukee. This year, the village is paying about $53 per ton through a DOT contract with Morton Salt, Murphy said.

Despite heavy use the past two months, the village does not appear to be in any danger of running out of salt. Salt delivered to Grafton is stored in a 1,800-ton-capacity dome, which still has enough salt for at least several more weeks, Murphy noted.

"When we get down to 300 tons, we'll see where we are," he said. "Since we have to plan ahead for next winter (as part of the 2011 calendar year), we could get a better deal by buying more now."

As for snow removal, the village was well within budget for overtime pay and fuel and equipment costs on the eve of this week's storms, Murphy said.

"Until now, most of the snow has been during the day, and we've been able to handle it without much trouble," he said. "But you never know how things will change each winter."