



MARK O'NEILL/SUN MEDIA FILES



PETER NOEHAMMER
Alternative salts are too-tasty

Sweet solution nixed

Road salt leaves a bad taste in the mouths of environmentalists but there are several products out there to be sweet on.

The City of Toronto has experimented with a liquid byproduct of the sugar beet - which sells under the retail names GeoMelt and Fusion.

But Peter Noehammer, the city's director of transportation services, said they are just too expensive and not effective enough to replace rock salt outright.

It has also tested magnesium chloride, a less toxic cousin to sodium chloride but it is also pricey, he said.

Ottawa resident Mark Watson said he's tried but had no luck getting Toronto to consider his non-toxic natural alternative called Ecotraction.

Alternative

The dark green porous rock is widely used in Scandinavia, said Watson, who was driven to look for an alternative when his dog and a neighbouring pet canine contracted lymphoma and the vet said rock salt was a likely culprit.

The rock is used to soak up moisture and provide traction areas, not melt the ice like salt. "It creates a traction zone and a protective layer," Watson said from Vancouver where he was displaying his 3-year-old company at an eco-friendly trade show. He's offered a trial run to Toronto for a wholesale cost but hasn't received much interest, he said.

Katrina Miller of the Toronto Environmental Alliance says it's about time the city started taking the long-term costs of road salt into account: "Is it penny wise, pound foolish when our rivers are as salty as our oceans?" Miller asks. "Isn't healthy rivers worth a little extra money?"

-Brian Gray

got a heavy workout this season. All that salt used during the near-record amount of snowfall this winter has to go down our rivers and streams will suffer a "toxic shock" to the ecosystem, says 10 environmentalist Katrina Miller.

in the wound

ays will suffer 'toxic shock' after heavy usage this winter

our rivers to be

City Councillor Glenn Baermaecker, an environmentalist who chairs the committee, which oversees the city's snow removal. That steps have been to ensure minimal salt from the salt-laden

and say the comment onto Environmental are fair and accurate; Baermaecker said. "But our priority is to keep the sidewalks safe and clear - road salt is a devil right now."

Watersystem

Ontario Place, where using a snow-melt machine, the runoff goes to two underground tanks before it goes to the Ashbridge's Bay plant, he said. And runoff is collected by the sewer system and before re-entering the

problem with salt, he said unlike gas, oil, and antifreeze, it can't

be filtered out.

But Miller isn't impressed with the plan.

"It's very conservative and very unimaginative," Miller says, adding it's too technical and the city should spend more time looking at the use of alternative methods of making roads safe. "It doesn't go nearly far enough."

The city's recent \$20-million foray into the snow removal business has forced the dumping of huge mountains of snow in several spots around the city including one in the Don Valley, just metres from the murky waters of the river many have been fighting to revive over the past few years.

Grading at the site directs runoff away from nearby water and silt fences at the base of the piles keep debris from getting away, De Baermaecker said of the city's efforts to alleviate the consequences.

"We do the best to clean up this toxic soup that our snow becomes after sitting on our streets for several days but the salt can't be taken out," he said.

Gord Miller, the Environ-

mental Commissioner of Ontario, said the melting of the salt piles in the city is less a culprit in rising salinity levels than the runoff after any snowstorm.

"The higher concentration of salt in lower amounts of liquid is a bigger problem," Miller said, as is the "aerosol effect" where spray from vehicles on wet, sloppy streets launches the brine into trees and other road-side vegetation.

Corrosion

Road salts also contaminate soils, damage plant life and accelerate the corrosion of roads, bridges, sidewalks, parking lots and vehicles, said Miller, who dealt with the issue in his annual report delivered late last year about the two million tonnes of road salt used across the province every winter - 80% by municipalities and the rest on provincial roads.

Road salts can contaminate ground water and compromise drinking water quality for communities relying on well water, Miller said. He noted that the estimated

repair costs for bridges alone to be \$125 million to \$325 million annually, and that 30-45% of all chlorides present in the Great Lakes are a result of using winter road salts.

Toronto's 200 salt trucks have already dumped the 125,000 tonnes it uses in a typical year to make the 5,100 km of roads, 8,200 km of sidewalks and 500 bridges safe for pedestrians and drivers, says Peter Noehammer, Toronto's director of transportation services.

"We have been trying to watch our application of salt," Noehammer maintains. "We are sensitive to not only the financial cost of using more salt but also the environmental impact."

Computer-controlled distribution - instead of operators eye balling the roads to determine how much they should spread on any stretch of ice-coated pavement, as well as a pre-emptive plan to spray streets with brine before a forecasted dump of snow - has allowed the city to reduce usage by 15%-20% over the average salt levels of 2001, Noehammer says.