



# COUNTY HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE WORKERS

Keeping Us Safe During Severe Weather

*—Dan Bahr, Government Affairs Associate, Wisconsin Counties Association*

**A**lthough the State of Wisconsin retains ownership over its state trunk highway system, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) contracts with Wisconsin's 72 counties to perform routine maintenance activities on these roadways. The contracts entered into between the state and county highway departments are a model for cooperation and efficiency. Legislative audits have shown that this arrangement is not only cost effective but in the best interest of the citizens of Wisconsin and the users of our state highway system. This partnership has

existed for over 99 years, since the inception of the Wisconsin state trunk highway system. Thus, WisDOT does not own any snowplows; county highway departments own 755 snowplows that operate on the state highway system throughout the state.

In Wisconsin, highway maintenance activities are divided into two categories: winter and routine maintenance. Winter maintenance of the state trunk highway system includes snowplowing, de-icing, and drift control. Routine maintenance involves the daily upkeep of the highway system, adjacent roadsides and includes a wide range of activities intended to preserve the infrastructure and save taxpayer dollars. There are 113,000 miles of local streets and county and state highways in Wisconsin. This includes 11,433 miles, or

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# WINTER IN WISCONSIN

34,620 lane miles (one lane mile equals a one-mile roadway that is 12 feet wide), of state-maintained highways. Under WisDOT policy, county highway departments determine when and how to respond to a severe winter weather event. A patrol superintendent is typically responsible for calling out the county crews.

Wisconsin typically experiences its most severe winter weather during December, January, and February. Average snowfall ranges from about 45 inches in the south to as much as 150 inches near the shores of Lake Superior. On average, about 30 to 40 winter weather events hit Wisconsin each winter. Blowing snow and fog that occur periodically can cause severe visibility restrictions for drivers. While only a couple large freezing rain events normally strike the state each winter, the state experiences numerous freezing drizzle and freezing fog events that cause roads to ice over.

According to the WisDOT, there are approximately 1,500 county highway department employees who are certified to operate winter maintenance vehicles. Any employee who is operating a winter maintenance vehicle on the state system, is required to hold a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). About half of the 1,500 county employees conducting winter maintenance activities are assigned to assist on the State Trunk Highway and Interstate System. During non-



## DON'T FOLLOW A PLOW OR STOP TOO CLOSELY.

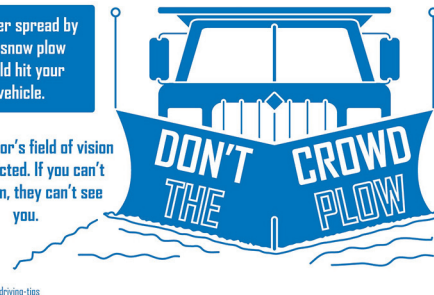
! Caution: Snow plows move slowly, make wide turns, stop often, overlap lanes and exit the road frequently.

De-icer spread by the snow plow could hit your vehicle.

Snow clouds thrown up by plows can reduce visibility to zero and conceal other vehicles or hazards.

! An operator's field of vision is restricted. If you can't see them, they can't see you.

! The road behind an active snow plow is safer to drive on. Stay behind it and use caution when passing.



Source:  
[www.nhtsa.gov/winter-driving-tips](http://www.nhtsa.gov/winter-driving-tips)

winter events, many of the county employees who conduct winter maintenance activities spend their time working on non-winter routine maintenance activities.

When driving during severe weather events, it is important to be respectful of the difficult conditions facing winter maintenance workers. Winter maintenance vehicles typically travel at 25-35 miles per hour, which in many cases is significantly slower than the posted speeds. It is important to note that the operator's field of vision is also severely restricted.

It is not legal to follow a snowplow at a range closer than 200 feet. It is legal to pass a snowplow but doing so should be done with great care as visibility and blowing conditions can make such a maneuver difficult and dangerous for both the passing vehicle and for the winter maintenance vehicle operator. It is important to note that between 1984 and 2004 there were 17 snowplows involved in fatal crashes in Wisconsin. In our efforts to promote highway safety for our workers, we want to keep you informed on the best practices and the difficulty of the work done by our county highway maintenance workers, as well as remind you to drive carefully this winter. ♦