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Boston has ‘no alternatives’ but to dump excess snow in harbor

Environmentalists worry about pollutants in snow but say city has no choice in dealing with record pileup



Boston may have to dump excess snow from this winter’s record storms into Boston Harbor to prevent congestion on the roadways and other public safety risks, local media reported.

Until now, snow plowed from streets and sidewalks has been transported to “snow farms” in empty lots in Boston. But this year it has accumulated there faster than crews have been able to melt it, leading Mayor Marty Walsh to call for dumping snow into the ocean “as a last resort,” local news website BostInno reported.

Snow piles at intersections have reached as high as 20 feet, Mike Dennehy, interim commissioner of the Boston public works department, said Wednesday.

Environmentalists initially raised concerns over the plan, saying the snow would likely contain trash, oil, road salts and other pollutants. But George Bachrach, president of the Environmental League of Massachusetts, said the city might have no

other alternative.

“Dumping snow into Boston Harbor should only be a last resort,” Bachrach told local media. “However, we may have reached that point, with no other alternatives. Clearing up the streets and public safety is always the highest priority.”

Multiple snowstorms have slammed into Boston over the past month, dumping over 70 inches of snow and smashing the previous 30-day record of 58.8 inches in 1978, AccuWeather reported.

“We prefer not to have to put it in [the bay], but when there’s an extraordinary condition — and these are certainly extraordinary conditions — we support this,” Bruce Berman, spokesman for nonprofit group Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, said Monday.

According to Bob Chant, professor of physical oceanography and estuarine dynamics at Rutgers University, Boston Harbor already contains about 10 million

tons of salt. As of Feb. 10, the city dumped around 60,000 tons of salt onto the roads — less than 1 percent of what’s in the water. Because of that, even if all the road snow was dumped at once it wouldn’t have a significant impact, Chant said.

Normally, state law prohibits the dumping of snow in public waterways because of contaminants that could be carried along with it. But when the snow creates a public safety risk, cities and towns can ask permission from the Department of Environmental Protection to dump the snow into the ocean, local media reported.

Several other Massachusetts cities including Lawrence, Lowell, Marblehead and Salem have notified the state that they need to dump snow into local rivers or the ocean, said Edmund Coletta, spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The last time Boston dumped snow into the harbor was 2009, according to the Boston Globe. The U.S. Coast Guard station in the city has notified the state that it plans to dump snow into the ocean.

Before snow is dumped into the ocean or rivers, crews must remove debris from it, and it cannot be pushed into shallow water or wetlands, according to local media.

Much of Boston Harbor reaches depths up to 40 feet and has strong tidal currents, so the environmental risks of dumping snow there would be minimal, Save the Harbor said.