

Boston Probably Won't Dump All That Snow in the Harbor



There was a time in our nation's history when a group of men, furious with the British for burying them in taxes, threw a bunch of tea into the Boston Harbor. With the city buried underneath an almost unprecedented amount of snow over the past two weeks and snow farms filling up fast, it makes sense that we would look to our forefathers for inspiration on what to do with the white stuff piling up on the sides of our roads.

But a Boston Snow Party isn't likely to happen anytime soon.

Before 1997, snow was dumped in the harbor as a matter of course, but that changed when the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection banned the practice. Snow cleared from roadways was full of pollutants between the deicing agents and whatever happened to be on the road from which it was plowed.

So why did Mayor Marty Walsh say on Monday morning that the city may resort to dumping snow in the harbor?

Because the DEP has provisions that allow for it in emergency situations. From its website (please note that the typeface was emergency red in its original form):

February 9, 2015: Due to the extraordinary weather experienced by the Commonwealth in the past several weeks, municipalities throughout the Commonwealth are facing significant challenges in their efforts clear, remove and dispose of historic accumulations of snow. MassDEP recognizes that cities and towns may need to undertake emergency measures to ensure protection of public safety.

As communities proceed with necessary emergency snow disposal, we recommend you use the best management guidelines included in the MassDEP Emergency Disposal Guidance below, including:

- Dispose of snow in open water with adequate flow and mixing to prevent ice dams from forming.

- Do not dispose of snow in saltmarshes, vegetated wetlands, certified vernal pools, shellfish beds, mudflats, drinking water reservoirs and their tributaries, Zone IIs or IWPA's of public water supply wells, Outstanding Resource Waters, or Areas of Critical Environmental Concern.

- Do not dispose of snow where trucks may cause shoreline damage or erosion.

- Consult with the municipal Conservation Commission to ensure that snow disposal in open water complies with local ordinances and bylaws.

And despite the environmental hazards snow in the harbor may pose, at least one harbor advocacy group has gone on record in support of dumping snow in certain situations. In 2011, Bruce Berman of Save the Harbor, Save the Bay told the Associated Press: "When there's a compelling reason — and believe me, these storms have given us a compelling reason — to snow dump, I support it."

Just not, most likely, this winter.

"It is a last resort option that we do not think we will need to use at this point," Bonnie McGilpin, press secretary for Mayor Walsh, told Boston.com.

It seems that between the snow farms and those snow melters (borrowed from Massport and Northeastern University) that can tackle hundreds of tons of the white stuff per hour, the only snow falling into the harbor is the snow that comes from the sky.

Which is too bad, because it would be therapeutic to watch this plague of snowflakes scooped off our roads and tossed into the sea.

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