

Sarah Betancourt | Sunday March 1st, 2015

What to do with all that snow? Boston cleanup a brutal chore and it's not over



Blizzards and major snow storms have been battered much of New England since snowstorm Juno hit on 27 January, threatening records and causing havoc. They have also posed one very big problem indeed: what to do with all that snow.

Prior to the arrival of Juno, Boston had seen just 5in of snow. By 28 February, it was a different tale: 102in of snow had fallen on the city, making it Boston's second snowiest winter since records began in 1872. The snowiest is still 1995-96, when 107.6in fell, but February 2015 was the snowiest month on record, with 59.1in – or almost 5ft. With 4-6in predicted for a storm on 1 March, Boston is on track to break the record for its snowiest winter ever.

The snow has taken a heavy toll, shutting down the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) for three days and causing

delays for many more, and causing schools and colleges to shut for days in a row. Some, like Emerson College, have not held Monday classes since early December. People across the city have waged wars over parking spaces. In Weymouth, dogs are using snowbanks to escape yards. Such chaos has not been seen before.

And such snow must be removed. Since the beginning of the season, 303,172 miles of road have been plowed in Boston, with 109,848 tons of salt doled out. As icicles the size of Celtics players hang off buildings, some almost touching the ground, city workers have worked 190,262 hours to keep the streets clear.





Bonnie McGilpin, speaking on behalf of the mayor of Boston, Marty Walsh, and the city's department of public works, said nearly 40,000 truckloads of snow had been removed from the streets of Boston. Dump trucks had brought snow to four major snow farms, she said, two located in the Hyde Park neighborhood, one in Jamaica Plain and the fourth on the Dry Docks in the Seaport District. At the height of the storms, 10 such snow farms were operating.

The public works department secures public and private land when it is necessary to remove a large amount of snow from the streets. The unprecedented amount of snow led Mayor Walsh to consider dumping snow into Boston Harbor, which led some to raise environmental concerns. According to McGilpin, though: "Dumping snow in the harbor is a last resort option. The city is focused on bringing snow to snow farms and melting it there to increase capacity."

With wind chill sometimes reaching -20F (-29C), barely any melting has occurred. The temperature has risen above freezing only twice in the last week.

At the height of the storm, there were 600 pieces of equipment on the road - 100 of them owned by the city and 500 from private contractors. New York City lent Boston two snow melters. Northeastern University and Massport also lent snow melters for several days.

Bruce Berman, director of strategy and programs at Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, told the Guardian his organization has been keeping track of snow removal efforts.

"We support open-water snow disposal as a last resort in emergencies provided that the water is deep and fast moving as it is in the Boston Harbor," he said. "Urban snow is pretty dirty, but so is urban storm water. We would rather use well managed snow farms to screen grit

and debris but this years snows have been devastating. Fortunately, Mayor Walsh has not had to do it, though other communities have."

Four Massachusetts towns - Lowell, Lawrence, Salem and Marblehead - have had to dump snow into the ocean. Webb Russell, the harbormaster for Marblehead, a small town along the north coast of Massachusetts, explained the snow dumping process to the Guardian.

"Well, Marblehead is historically a three mile by four mile town, so it's pretty small," he said. "We have always been dumping snow in the ocean. It really started to be regulated 10 years ago. Now a selectman makes the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) aware that we want to dump. The DEP then grants permission.

"We get a period of time to dump the snow. We've had to have it extended twice in the past month. We can only dump snow that is on public property. It is physically loaded into dump trucks. There are only two places where we are allowed to dump. One is near the causeway, and one is near this office. I haven't seen anything like this since the storm of 1978."

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