

Focus Group Preliminary Report

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This preliminary report is based on my observations as organizer and moderator of the four DES/PSU sponsored focus groups. Because the final focus group was completed just last week, the transcriptions of dialogue and formal content analysis has not yet been completed.

In all, 34 people participated in the four focus groups – seventeen each in Windham and Concord. The participants were enthusiastic, interested in the topic, and prepared to share their opinions. Each brought a different perspective, informed primarily by their diverse backgrounds, which included (among others) truck operator, state employee, engineer, scientist, homemaker, retiree, and student. The majority of the Windham participants discovered the focus group opportunity through our advertisement in the Windham Observer, while a large number of the Concord participants learned of the focus groups either through word-of-mouth or the DES and PSU press releases.

Several main themes emerged regarding the issues of road conditions, water quality, and road salt reduction, each of which will be discussed briefly below. However, these themes are complicated somewhat by a noticeable difference in opinion between the participants in the Windham focus groups and the participants in the Concord focus groups. Simply put, the Windham participants seemed to view the problem as strictly an environmental issue, while the Concord participants voiced a broader, more structural concern with the economic, political, and social impacts of changing driving behaviors and reducing road salt. These differences could be caused by the makeup of the groups – the Windham participants resided in a narrow radius of southern, more affluent New Hampshire towns such as Windham, Salem, and Londonderry, while the Concord participants hailed from a wider region including Franklin, Plymouth, Alexandria, and Claremont. Again, this is a preliminary observation - these differences can be viewed in greater detail only upon completion of the formal analysis.

Main Themes

- 1) The actual expectations regarding road conditions were difficult to discern. Most of the participants had no set expectations, or else indicated that they always expected the worst. However, there was a sense that the roads should be kept clear enough for participants to “get to work” but not necessarily kept clear for those who were driving for other reasons, such as running errands. In many cases, the folks who expressed an expectation for clean roads did so facetiously, with statements such as "I expect the roads to be clean because the state goes so crazy with the salt that it's no wonder they're clear". Overall, the lack of clearly defined expectations regarding road conditions can be attributed to two factors. First, participants have come to expect drastically different conditions (both better and worse) on the highways than they do on local roads. Second, most participants are aware that weather conditions are not uniform during a storm – in many instances it will be raining in Londonderry but snowing

in Franklin. One point of consensus across all groups, however, was that drivers from Massachusetts appear to have different expectations regarding road conditions than do drivers from New Hampshire.

- 2) There is need for (and interest in) education and information about road salt and its attendant impacts on water quality. On multiple occasions participants made statements such as "I think people would respond to this issue if they had more information" or "I had no idea salt was a problem, why don't they give us information along the lines of what we hear about recycling, global warming, etc." However, it is important to note that education was visualized in different ways. For example, the participants that saw road salt as an environmental issue (Windham) wanted education for the purpose of influencing lawmakers and swaying public opinion. On the other hand, the participants that concentrated on the structural issues (Concord) wanted education for the sole purpose of allowing business owners, state agencies, schools, and drivers *to make driving choices themselves*. By far, participants favored education over other options such as new technology, or different methods of salt application.
- 3) The idea of new technology was met with skepticism. Each of the four focus groups voiced a concern with the safety of new technologies - MTBE in gasoline was mentioned as an example of a new technology gone wrong. Again, regional differences (Windham vs. Concord) emerged, as the Windham focus groups worried about the environmental effects of new technologies while the Concord focus groups were concerned with the impact of heightened costs on taxes and local budgets. "New technologies" included both different products (such as brine or other chemical solutions) and different application tools (such as salt regulators or measurement units on trucks).
- 4) Each of the focus groups viewed road salt and water quality primarily as a State issue. Despite my questions about their experiences with parking lots, local roads, etc, most folks framed their opinions in terms of "the state should do certain things" or "the state needs to apply less salt." One of the more strident comments, "the state's black-road policy is white with salt" was actually voiced word-for-word by two separate individuals in two different groups. For the most part, the participants were dissatisfied with the state's performance during winter weather, although they did acknowledge that during severe weather there is most likely nothing that can be done, in any context, to ensure clear roads.
- 5) The focus groups were split (again, by location) as to whether or not people should be expected to change their driving habits during winter weather. One individual (from a Windham group) stated "I always leave for work 1 hour earlier when it snows, so why can't everyone else?" Others, particularly from the Concord groups, felt that the burden of change belonged to state and local agencies, instead of the driving public. One suggestion that illustrates this latter perspective involved improving up-to-the-minute communication between road crews and the driving public, so that individuals will be aware of changing conditions and could therefore act accordingly.

- 6) There was also no consensus as to the acceptability of reduced water quality as trade-off for clear roads. The Windham participants felt that reduced water quality is unacceptable, whether or not road salt happened to be the main culprit. In fact, these participants saw road salt as only one cause among many that contribute to poor water. In contrast, the Concord groups were ready to accept reduced water quality as an unfortunate, but necessary, by-product of clean roads. This perspective tended to be framed as a safety issue, with one participant stating “I’m as much of a tree-hugger as anyone else but public safety comes before the environment.”

Summary

The most dominant message emerging from the focus groups (again, after preliminary analysis) is that the driving public is willing to receive education (at the state level) about the environmental impacts of road salt, and *may* be willing to change their driving habits accordingly. However, any education or information must be provided in multiple ways, designed specifically for different audiences. In some cases, the issue should be framed as an environmental issue, while in other cases it should be presented as a decision-making tool.