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Snow Man

Riding along with the Road Commission for Montcalm County during 'some of the worst conditions you'll ever see'

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It's about 3 p.m. on Dec. 28, in the middle of a driving snowstorm.

Police are advising motorists to stay off the roads, which are thoroughly snow covered and icy. What little traffic there is on M-57 east of Greenville is moving at a crawl, barely visible through the fog of snow with visibility down to less than a half mile.



Les Lillie pays close attention to the road while plowing M-57 during a snowstorm on Dec. 28.

"Imagine how much worse this would be if the wind was blowing," said Les Lillie, a snowplow driver with the Road Commission for Montcalm County in Stanton for four years, who is just beginning to spread his second 13-ton load of road salt while plowing the nine-mile stretch of M-57 from M-66 to Clay Street in Greenville.

Neither rain nor sleet nor snow

His day's work already appears buried under a fresh blanket of snow across the roadway, with only a couple of narrow ruts peeking through.

Lillie has been traversing the same nine miles of roadway all day, back and forth, first dumping a layer of anti-icing solution and then plowing when the storm picked up during the early afternoon.

"You wouldn't even know it," Lillie said while crossing Greenville's eastern city limits while heading eastbound toward M-66. "This is the worst stretch here, between Berridge and Miller (roads). When the wind blows it just blows across here."

It's all in a day's work for Lillie and the road commission's 21 other plow drivers.

Just like the U.S. Postal Service's credo, neither rain nor sleet nor snow can stay the road commission plows from their appointed rounds. Lillie said going out in the worst weather Mother Nature has to offer and making the roadways safer for motorists is a fun part of his job - and definitely a challenge.

"Sometimes you don't see more than a truck length in front of you, especially at night when it's snowing," he stated.

Weather tools

Randy Stearns, the road commission's managing director, wasn't surprised by that Friday's storm in the least.

In fact, he had been tracking it several days in advance.

Stearns said he has access to much more information than the general public receives on television but he still pays attention to regular TV newscasts. Both Stearns and Road Commission Superintendent Mark Christensen keep close tabs on conditions through a private telephone line with the National Weather Service in Grand Rapids plus a few weather-related Internet sites on the computer.

When a winter storm first appears in long-range forecasts, the pair begin paying closer attention to it development.

"I usually call them (the National Weather Service) once or twice a day and Mark calls them too," Stearns said.

Topnotch forecasts

When storms are detected, the National Weather Service hosts both conference telephone calls and "webinars" - Internet-based presentations with graphics and weather maps that detail the storm's movement and predicted effect on local areas.

"Kent County and us are experimenting with a special program that the (National Weather Service) is doing where we get a special code number and we get on and watch the front coming plus listen to it on a cell phone or telephone and talk to them," Stearns said.

"We can ask specific questions like whether it's going to be a major storm for us or if it's going to miss us, whether we should keep guys over or bring them in early," he said. "It's really nice."

Stearns is able to obtain weather information specific to Montcalm County that shows where a storm will be the most intense and when it will strike, accurate up to within an hour.

"The last few times they've been within 45 minutes." he noted.



Tom Hansen plows Holland Lake Road between M-91 and Fitzner Road on Wednesday afternoon.

Planning ahead, with flexibility

Both Christensen and Stearns use all the information they collect to determine a flexible plan for clearing roads and scheduling snowplow drivers.

They adjust the plan depending upon traffic patterns when the storm hits and input from road commission foremen and meteorologists.

"That will tell us if we need the whole crew to come in or whether we need a certain number of guys to cover the routes," Stearns explained.

Drivers typically work their normal shift from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Fridays and pick up extra hours plowing on nights and weekends as needed, assigned by a callback list based on seniority.

Each driver is assigned to U.S. 131, a state trunkline or a county primary route as their first priority during a snowstorm. Only when those areas are cleared do plows begin working on county and local roads in assigned townships.

As a general rule, on weekends and holidays the road commission only plows U.S. 131, state trunkline and county primary routes. Secondary and local roads often must wait until the following Monday or day after a holiday.

"It depends on the depth of the snow," Stearns said. "Two weeks ago, when we had four or five inches of snow and it was going to turn really cold and pack down, we did plow the township blacktop roads. But with this last storm I know the guys worked most of (New Year's Day) but they didn't get on any gravel roads."

The equipment

The road commission operates out of three garages, located in Greenville, Howard City and Stanton.

Each sports an office, equipment storage building, salt dome and gravel shed.

One driver is assigned to each of the county's 20 townships while two others are responsible for U.S. 131.

Lillie drives one of the road commission's newer trucks featuring dual rear axles, a 13-ton dump box, a rear-mounted salt and sand spreader, and plows on the front, side and undercarriage.

The salt spreader deposits a set amount of salt per mile regardless of the truck's speed.

The driver's side of Lillie's truck cab possesses a computerized control box for the salt spreader, a gauge measuring how much downward pressure the plows are exerting and two joysticks controlling the undercarriage and front plows.

Another joystick mounted near the center of the dashboard controls a wing plow on the passenger side.

"We don't go very fast," Lillie said. "Thirty to 35 mph is the best speed for blades and if we're spreading salt out here. You'll end up where you don't want to be if you go too fast."

Improving technology

Stearns, who started his career as a plow driver about 35 years ago, said larger and more advanced trucks have made the job of plowing a little easier than in the past.

"The technology has come a long way," he said. "When I was a driver every so often we'd have to stop and spray off the (spark) plug wires because they'd get wet. The trucks would quit alongside the road or the fuel line would freeze up. We used to have to raise our dump box to spread salt or sand."

But "now everything is diesel and it's all automated," Stearns noted. "It's almost like an airplane cockpit inside. You just punch in what you want."

The road commission also has its own heavy duty wrecker as well as a small fleet of graders to clear snow during impassible conditions. Drivers also team up together and plow two-wide to clear roadways if they become too snow covered for one truck to handle alone.



A wing plow on the side of Les Lillie's plow truck clears snow obscuring the fog line along M-57 on Dec. 28.

Long days, short nights

Despite reaching the end of an eight-hour work day and being guaranteed of having to work several more hours, Lillie isn't showing any signs of wear as he maneuvers the plow around all four corners of the M-57 and M-66 intersection.

He pushes the wet, heavy snow off to the side of the intersection, leaving barely a trace of white stuff on the roadway.

Plow drivers often spend long hours during the wintertime keeping the county's roadways clean. Stearns said they can work up to 16 hours straight with the option of leaving after 12 hours or whenever they feel too tired to drive.

Lillie said he has worked up to 44 hours of overtime during one two-week pay period.

"This time of year we're on eight hours a day unless there's a storm. If a storm moves in late in the afternoon or evening, normally they'll call us in," he explained. "The overtime is nice but money is tight so they try to keep it to a minimum. But you've got to do what you've got to do in the winter."

Since snowstorms occur at all hours of the day and night, plow drivers often work a lot of late nights and early mornings.

"Sometimes they'll call us in at 2 or 3 a.m.," Lillie said.

He's also missed a variety of family gatherings when it came time to plow. Stearns said that's not uncommon.

"Whatever day it happens, whether it be Christmas or New Year's, the opportunity is always there for the phone to ring," he said. "You can just about figure at 2 on any given morning if we get a storm the phone's going to be ringing. Or if they're here until 9 p.m. we may get together and just decide we'll come back at 5 a.m. There's a lot of short nights."

"From bad to a whole lot worse"

Now driving back westbound on M-57, Lillie said the Dec. 28 storm was about average for the holiday season.

He also said it was nowhere near the worst he'd ever seen. Lillie said a snowstorm last year presented the most harrowing conditions he's endured while plowing.

"It was midday and I had been out on M-57 for about three hours," Lillie said. "I had to reload and get my (plow) blades switched. By the time I got back out there was no blacktop visible so I was just hoping I was still in the lane. That was in about an hour and a half time. It went from bad to a whole lot worse."

Stearns said he's had to pull all the county's trucks off the road a handful of times because the weather was too severe.

"Several years ago back, when we had what I call a winter, we had a few times when we brought them in for a few hours and sent them back out," he said. "Over the last few years we've just left them out. They're in some of the worst conditions you'll ever see."

Lillie said he actually has gotten stuck "a few times" while plowing.

"It goes along with the territory," he said. "I've had another truck pull me out and we had to get a wrecker to pull me out because I got slid off the road and got stuck in the mud. That was the worst I've ever gotten stuck."



Looking at a convex mirror on the side, snow flies off the wing plow into the ditch.

Road hazards

Along with the terrible weather conditions, Lillie said motorists can make his job more difficult at times.

"When it snows like this people have to turn their headlights on," he said. "Visibility is not good, especially if they're in a white car."

Lillie's plow then passed an abandoned car stuck in front of the former Country Roads building on Greenville's east side.

"That's another big fear, when a car is parked next to the road covered with snow and after it's dark," he said.

Lillie cautioned drivers to be careful around plows since the trucks often take up more than a single lane of traffic.

"Our primary concern is to uncover the center line and the fog line," he said. "We run on the center line so we can clean it off well."

Lillie said he has seen drivers take unnecessary risks around him.

"I've seen a lot of stupid people that have four-wheel-drives or see the tracks and think they can speed. I've had semi trucks blow by me like I'm standing still," he said. "They don't realize that those roads are slippery. It's a lack of patience."

Mailboxes and garbage cans

Lillie said residents also have to be mindful of plows coming by and throwing snow several feet off the roadway.

Even at about 35 mph on M-57, Lillie's side-mounted wing plow throws the slushy, snowy mix about six or seven feet into the ditch. The spray isn't high enough to knock mailboxes off their posts but it's plenty hard enough to tip over garbage cans placed too close to the shoulder.

"Mailboxes are collateral damage," Lillie said. "Sometimes we can't avoid them. We have to keep our speed up with wet snow.

"Garbage cans are always fun too," he added. "When it snows people put their cans in the driveway or right on the edge of the road. We don't try to hit them but we're not going to go out of our way not to."

Lillie said he also must be careful to avoid curbs with the side-mounted plow and to pick it up while driving over large bumps and railroad tracks.

He learned that the hard way at 4 a.m. during the season's first snowstorm when a hydraulic line burst while Lillie was trying to pick the plow up to go over the railroad tracks on M-91 north of Greenville. The plow didn't lift high enough, hooked the tracks and snapped part of the mounting mechanism. That required a trip back to the garage and several hours sidelined for repairs.

End of a long day?

By about 5:30 p.m. Lillie is finally headed back into Greenville after making two more passes each way on M-57, plowing it mostly clear of snow and spreading nearly all of his 13-ton load of salt.

The highway now is mostly just wet pavement. The snowfall is letting up significantly.

"I'm not going to hold my breath," Lillie said. "There could be another wave coming through."

He expects crews to stay on county roads until about 10 p.m., break for the night and then return at 5 a.m. to finish plowing secondary and side roads.

"If I have to, I'll keep running until the snow stops," said Lillie.