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State AOT installs new technology to fight icy roads

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SEARSBURG — The small mountain town of Searsburg will use the latest technology to fight mother nature this winter because for the first time in New England, the road will basically deice itself. A new technology called SafeLane Surface Overlay is being laid on Route 9 in Searsburg this week that will excrete deicing solution during slippery conditions.

The Vermont Agency of Transportation and Minnesota-based Cargill Inc. teamed together to test the technology. Three hundred-sixty feet of the westbound lane on a steep hill in Searsburg will be the first road tested in New England. The overlay looks to decrease the amount of accidents on that stretch of the highway.

According to Jennifer Fitch, a research engineer for AOT, last winter produced 22 incidents and seven accidents at the location.

"You put this where you want to reduce accidents," said Fitch.

The technology is a two-part epoxy that is laid on the road with limestone rocks placed on top. The limestone not only creates more traction for drivers but it also acts as a sponge. De-icer solution will then be poured over the stones, and when the road gets wet, the solution will mix with the water and pour onto the road.

"The stone acts like a rigid sponge and absorbs anti-icing solution," said Fitch.

Fitch said the road needs to be soaked with the solution once every two to four weeks depending on the amount of moisture. The road will continue to be maintained as normal. When



Photo by Peter Crabtree

Craig Bottesi, center, and Jeffrey Murray help install a deicing system Wednesday on Route 9 in Searsburg. The innovative road-surface overlay is designed to automatically release deicing agents whenever snow and ice develop, according to the Vermont Agency of Transportation.

salted in the winter, the salt will mix with water and continue to recharge the surface with the solution.

According to Anthony Hensley, the business development manager for Cargill, the technology was studied at Michigan Tech University for 10 years before Cargill purchased the license about four years ago.

"After 10 years of study they came up with Safelane," said Hensley.

Since then, Cargill has installed this technology in 31 other places spanning 19 states, said Hensley. Fitch added that the particular section of road in Searsburg is the steepest — with a

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13.5 percent grade — that Cargill has ever placed the overlay.

Two-thirds of the material for the overlay was provided by Cargill, the rest was paid for by AOT. The material costs \$6 per square foot. Material for the two lanes of highway costs approximately \$48,000, though AOT will only have to pay close to \$16,000 of that. Fitch said she could not compare the price to other road surfaces but did say it was more expensive.

The site was chosen because of its high rate of accidents.

“This is an area with high wintertime crash rates,” said Fitch.

Hensley said trucks trying to go up the hill there would downshift and lose traction. They would then slide backward and often jackknife.

“We won’t eliminate (accidents) but we’re hoping to significantly reduce them,” said Hensley.

Only the westbound lane will have the overlay. Fitch said that she will be using the eastbound lane for comparison. The westbound lane is also more prone to accidents.

Fitch said that she will be working with the state police to monitor the number of accidents on that stretch of road.