

Chapter 16

Highways—Conducting Winter Maintenance on Provincial Highways

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Highways is responsible for maintaining Saskatchewan’s 26,500 kilometers of provincial highways, the largest road network in Canada on a per capita basis.¹ Winter maintenance helps keep provincial highways clear of snow and ice to improve safety.

By January 2026, the Ministry strengthened its processes to conduct winter maintenance on provincial highways and fully implemented the four recommendations we first made in 2023.

The Ministry:

- Updated its Highway Hotline with clear road condition terminology for winter driving to help equipment operators make consistent road assessments and support drivers to make safe travel decisions. The terminology is reasonably consistent with other Canadian jurisdictions and the national standards set by the Transportation Association of Canada, which reduces confusion for interjurisdictional traffic.
- Centrally tracked when equipment operators waived their mandatory rest periods to help clear roads during extreme weather conditions. We found supervisors appropriately documented reasons to waive rest periods within a suitable time (within two weeks).
- Set a 10-day timeframe to report when operators do not meet winter service level expectations (e.g., not clearing snow from major highways within six hours of a snowstorm ending), and Ministry management reviewed reports that included these exceptions to determine any resource allocation adjustments.

Effective processes for conducting winter maintenance on provincial highways decrease dangerous road and driving conditions.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Highways is responsible for maintaining Saskatchewan’s highways under *The Highways and Transportation Act, 1997*, including winter snow and ice control.

The number and severity of storms vary each year affecting the number of staff required and other costs (e.g., fuel, equipment maintenance) incurred to perform winter maintenance.

¹ Ministry of Highways, *Annual Report for 2024–25*, p. 3.



The Ministry operates more than 300 snowplows throughout the province during the winter months, usually from November to April (six months of the year). It uses snow and ice removal equipment before, during, and after storms. Equipment operators are available 24/7. The Ministry also has contracts with a small number of service providers primarily for clearing roads in northern Saskatchewan.

The Ministry spent \$68.7 million on winter maintenance in 2024–25.²

2.1 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up audit of the Ministry's actions on the recommendations we made in 2023.

We concluded, for the 15-month period ended January 31, 2023, the Ministry of Highways had effective processes to conduct winter maintenance on provincial highways in Saskatchewan, except for areas in our four recommendations.³

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Ministry management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To carry out our follow-up audit, we examined the Ministry's updated policies, procedures, and guidance related to winter maintenance. We analyzed terminology used on the Highway Hotline, as well as examined waivers of rest periods and reports to Ministry management when service level expectations were not met. We also interviewed key staff responsible for managing winter maintenance activities in Saskatchewan.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at January 13, 2026, and the Ministry of Highways' actions up to that date.

3.1 Highway Hotline Terminology Updated

We recommended the Ministry of Highways update the Highway Hotline to provide clear and concise road condition terminology for winter driving.

(2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 53, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 5, 2024)

Status—Implemented

² Ministry of Highways, *Annual Report for 2024–25*, p. 21.

³ 2023 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 4, pp. 47–62.

The Ministry of Highways updated the Highway Hotline to provide clear and concise road condition terminology for winter driving.

In fall 2024, the Ministry updated the terminology (e.g., terms, definitions, map presentation) for road conditions in its maintenance manual and on its Highway Hotline website to better align with industry practice. For example, the Ministry removed the terms ‘seasonal driving’ and ‘winter conditions exist’ and added the terms ‘bare’ (dry/wet), ‘partly covered’, and ‘covered’. It also changed the colours used on the Highway Hotline map to blue for travel not recommended, black for bare, yellow for partly covered, and pink for covered.

As of January 2026, the Ministry’s winter road condition terminology includes:

- **Visibility conditions:** good, reduced, poor, and zero
- **Primary conditions:** bare (dry/wet), partly covered, covered, travel not recommended, closed, and report not available
- **Secondary conditions:** pavement frost, slush, ice, loose snow, heavy snow, snow packed, snow drifts, swirling snow, drifting snow, and fog

We found the Ministry’s terminology aligned with the national standard set by the Transportation Association of Canada with a few minor exceptions (e.g., added travel not recommended condition, used pink colour for covered condition rather than white). While terminology varies somewhat across Canada, we found the Ministry generally aligned with other Canadian provinces with similar road conditions and weather patterns (e.g., Alberta, Manitoba).

Clear terminology helps equipment operators make consistent assessments of road conditions and drivers make safer decisions about travelling on a highway.

3.2 Waiving of Rest Periods Tracked

We recommended the Ministry of Highways sufficiently track whether winter maintenance equipment operators meet work scheduling safety requirements (e.g., comply with rest periods) or waive mandatory 10-hour rest periods. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 57, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 5, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Highways tracks compliance with the 10-hour rest period safety requirement.

During extreme weather conditions that require longer hours to clear roads, an equipment operator may waive their required rest period (i.e., 10 consecutive hours of rest in every 24-hour period).



Since November 2024, the Ministry requires an operator's supervisor to discuss reasons with an operator as to why they may waive their rest period, document these discussions on a waiver memorandum (including the operator, supervisor, date, road, and reasons), and then save the waiver in a central network folder. While there is no formal deadline for documenting the waiver, the Ministry expects documentation to be completed within two weeks after a waived rest period occurs. The supervisors report any waivers to their managers, executive directors, human resource team, and Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU).

Operators waived their mandatory rest period about 60 times between October 1, 2024, and December 10, 2025, and supervisors generally documented the waiver within four days according to waivers on the Ministry's central network folder. For six waivers tested, we found supervisors appropriately documented reasons (e.g., winter storm, blocked roads) for waiving a rest period within one day.

Tracking when employees waive their 10-hour rest period helps the Ministry monitor compliance with scheduling safety requirements to reduce the risk operators become fatigued and may cause collisions.

3.3 Timely Reporting Occurring When Service Level Expectations Not Met

We recommended the Ministry of Highways set a timeframe for reporting instances to management when not meeting service level expectations for highway winter maintenance. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 58, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 5, 2024)

Status—Implemented

We recommended the Ministry of Highways require managers to review instances where staff did not meet service level expectations for highway winter maintenance. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 59, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 5, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Highways set a timeframe for reporting to management when operators do not meet service level expectations for highway winter maintenance. Management reviews these reports regularly.

In March 2024, the Ministry updated its maintenance manual to require operations supervisors report to their managers within 10 days any exceptions to the winter service level expectation (e.g., not clearing snow from major highways within six hours of a snowstorm ending).⁴ The manual requires managers to review the exception to identify any recurring issues and determine any resource allocation adjustments needed to meet service level expectations. Managers are also to notify regional directors of these exceptions. The Ministry requires reporting of exceptions to the winter service level expectation in monthly scorecards and quarterly reports.

⁴ www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/transportation/highways/highway-safety/winter-safety (26 March 2026).

From October 1, 2024, to December 8, 2025, we found the Ministry reported six exceptions (all on low priority roads in the northern region). The Ministry reported all six exceptions in its IT system within three days after the event occurred. The Ministry did not adjust resource allocations because the six exceptions were not significant (e.g., were uncleared highways with low traffic volumes and lengths of clearing delays were not extensive).

We found the Ministry reported all six exceptions within the relevant monthly scorecard and discussed them at regional meetings during the month of occurrence. The Ministry also reported the six exceptions in quarterly reports to its Executive Committee.

Timely reporting of service level exceptions helps the Ministry consider appropriate adjustments to meet its expectations for highway winter maintenance.

