

LESSON 8

Reading Selection

When Salt Isn't Safe

Have you ever ridden in a car in a snowstorm? Then you probably know that the roads can get awfully slippery. And that makes driving dangerous. In parts of the country where winters are fierce, the highway departments spread a mixture of sand and **road salt** on the roads. The sand helps tires get a grip. And the salt melts ice.

We want people who travel on these icy roads to be safe. But we are also concerned about the damage salt does. When spring comes and the snow and ice melt, salt dissolves in the water. Then passing cars wash or spray the salty water out to the roadside.

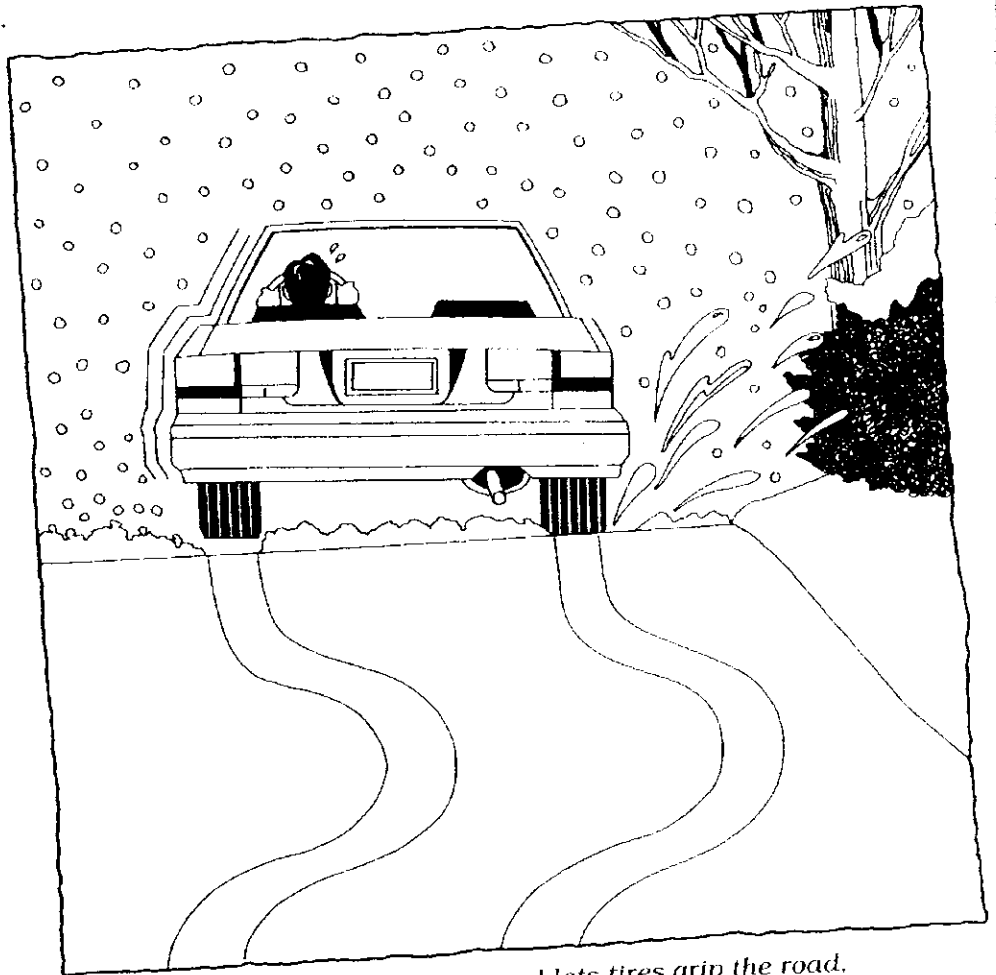
At the roadside, salt coats the bark of trees and soaks down into their roots. It "burns" the tops of tender new plants just coming out of the soil. Salt also covers plants that roadside animals such as rabbits and woodchucks depend on for food and shelter. It goes down through the soil to the water system below ground. Eventually, it runs into other bodies of water.

When salt enters a body of water such as a stream or a lake, it can cause harm there, too. Both plants and animals are sensitive to salt in different degrees. Take the egg and larval stages of many aquatic animals, for instance. Even the slightest increase in salt can kill them.

Is there a solution? We know that there are other chemicals that can melt ice just as well as salt does. However, these chemicals are more expensive. And while officials want the roads to be safe, they must consider costs when they make their decisions.

It's a Trade-off

Some areas have started using less harmful, but more expensive, chemicals. But many other areas are still dumping tons of salt on the roads every winter. If you were an official, what would you do?



Salt helps melt the ice and lets tires grip the road, but it can be harmful, too.