

Winter Watch: Rules to Protect Your Jobsite

Written by: Kathy Wells, Editor, Construction Business Owner Magazine & Digital Media

COLD WEATHER CONCERNS AND TOP TAKEAWAYS FROM A TRAVELERS' RISK CONTROL EXPERT

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), winter conditions this year are predicted to be drier than average across the South, with wetter-than-average conditions for areas of the Ohio Valley, Great Lakes, northern Rockies and Pacific Northwest. At print time, Jon Gottschalck, chief, Operational Prediction Branch, NOAA's Climate Prediction Center said, "Drought conditions are now present across approximately 59% of the country, but parts of the Western U.S. and southern Great Plains will continue to be the hardest hit this winter." So, what does this mean for weather-related risks on the jobsite? To find out, Construction Business Owner (CBO) Magazine spoke with Casey Banks (CB), managing risk control consultant, construction, energy and marine risk control, at Travelers, the second-largest writer of U.S. commercial property casualty insurance. Read on for an inside look at cold-weather risks as construction teams prepare for lower temperatures on the job.

CBO: How should construction teams plan to stay healthy while working winter projects?

CB: The best advice I can give is to be prepared. Monitor the weather conditions throughout the week, and make sure you show up to the jobsite dressed accordingly. If you must be outside, dress in layers. Start with a base of clothing made of moisture-wicking material, such as polypropylene or a similar apparel fabric. Next, add a middle layer with materials



that provide insulation and warmth, like polar fleece or wool. Finally, put on an outer layer designed to prevent wind, rain, and snow from getting in. Nylon or a lightweight waterproof material for the outer layer is a good option. Air between the layers will provide additional warmth. And don't forget a hat, gloves, and insulated boots.

Nutrition can also help combat the effects of cold weather. Your body needs food to burn to maintain your core temperature. Eat a well-balanced diet rich in complex carbohydrates, and rehydrate regularly throughout the day, as dry air in cold conditions can cause dehydration. Avoid smoking, which decreases circulation to the extremities, and stimulants, which can cause blood vessels in your hands and feet to narrow.

CBO: What precautions must employers take to ensure jobsites are safe in winter?

CB: Consider putting a snow-and-ice management plan in place for your projects. Assign tasks, such as snow removal in walkways, to team members and include backup members so everyone knows how they can help during inclement weather. Think about where you are working, the type of access to the jobsite and the availability of parking during a storm. For example, if workers are parking in a designated lot, is there a plan for clearing the snow or do you need to identify a backup location for everyone in the event of snow accumulation? It's also important to identify areas within the site that are protected from the elements and heated so workers can take periodic breaks throughout the day.

CBO: How should contractors take special care of their vehicles and heavy equipment in the cold?

CB: If you're using any heavy equipment outdoors, work with the vendor or manufacturer to understand safe use, storage, and maintenance during winter months and to uncover potential ancillary risks. For example, if a vehicle or piece of equipment needs to be plugged in, can this be done without creating a hazard to an employee, plow, or snowblower?

As part of the snow management plan, you will want to make sure that equipment operators are aware of any ground hazards, such as electrical conduits, hydrants, or anchor bolts, which may not be visible due to snow or ice buildup. It's also important to review how to safely access equipment and vehicles during colder months to avoid slip-and-fall injuries from ice buildup.

Providing workers with education and training on winter-weather driving best practices both on and off jobsites can help them travel safely to work and return home at the end of the day.

CBO: How can foremen, project managers, and fleet managers keep a project on schedule through winter weather events?

CB: Understanding the phases of construction, material installation, and potential winter weather effects is critical for project management staff who work in regions with colder weather.

For example, do cold temperatures stop materials from properly curing? Can specific materials be installed in lower temperatures? Since weather can affect timing, keep it in mind when building a schedule or committing to someone else's. You can also consider using a winter-weather preparedness checklist, which helps ensure that you have the appropriate resources needed to safely construct the project during inclement weather.

Communication between the project management team, foremen, and superintendents is also critical so that any changes to the schedule, site access, or resources are known well before the workers show up on-site.

With the increase of newer construction methods like modular and prefabricated construction, the tradespeople may be able to perform their work off-site more efficiently and safely and thus decrease the amount of time and workers it takes to perform installation work in the elements.

CBO: What are the most common complications from cold weather on a construction project?

CB: From a health and safety standpoint, there is the potential for frostbite and hypothermia while working outdoors during winter months. Early recognition of symptoms and knowledge of the treatments can be critical to preventing potential serious health issues.

Some other complications might include snow and ice buildup around the exterior of the site and in areas of the project that are exposed to the elements, such as roofs and open-air structures.


Have a plan to remove snow in areas where workers have access, and treat the walking surfaces with a sand or salt mixture to mitigate slip-and-fall hazards. This could include designating team members or contractors for snow removal, the sanding of walkways and other similar duties. Plan ahead so that you are not scrambling to coordinate cleanup the morning after a storm.

It's also important for contractors to think about access to temporary heat, which may require installation by a licensed tradesperson, well in advance of winter weather. Preventing fire hazards is a key consideration when planning for temporary heat sources.

Finally, frozen pipes are also a concern wherever there is active water in the building. Like fire losses, water intrusion can cause catastrophic damage if not caught in time.

That's why it's critical to have a site-protection plan in place that identifies areas that are not weathertight or that may have active water pipes without temporary or permanent heating systems in place.

CBO: Is there anything you'd like to add?

CB: Winter weather comes every year to many regions throughout the U.S., including the Northeast. The more we plan for it, the more prepared our projects will be to manage the changing conditions. The technology available to us – and thus our ability to anticipate inclement weather in advance – has improved over the years. So having a system in place to understand the effect on your projects, plus how to protect people and property, is a critical part of your weather preparedness plan. 



About the Author

Kathy Wells is editor of Construction Business Owner Magazine & Digital Media.

About the Article

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