Welcome to the 2020-2021 winter weather season! As if we didn’t already have enough to grapple with, we also have to plan for the almost inevitable snow and ice we will see over the next few months. If 2020 is any indication, we should expect something unusual this season!

In the “for what it’s worth category”, NOAA predicts a cooler and wetter winter, due in large part to a La Nina that’s expected to strengthen into 2021. If you’re looking for a more optimistic version, the Farmer’s Almanac thinks we will have temperatures above average with precipitation below average. Somebody has to be right!

As can be seen on the graph below, three of the last four years have seen a pretty significant effort put toward snow and ice removal. Last year the team spent a total of 1,060 hours removing snow and ice from campus, including 258 hours of overtime. That’s almost right on the 5 year average, but with a La Nina predicted this year, we are planning for a higher than average season.

Obviously there are fewer students and staff on campus, as well as a dramatic decrease in the number of commuters who might be affected by wintry weather…but our fundamental approach remains rooted in one principle – SAFETY is our top priority.

As a winter storm approaches, Facilities Management spends a lot of time monitoring various weather forecasts as we try to put together a “best guess” about how the storm will affect the Western campus. We are aware of the fact that employees and students commute from a variety of locations in Whatcom and Skagit counties, but we also have to make sure the 1,000 or so students who live on campus have continued access to dining services and other key facilities. We will also have to pay increased attention to our ability to deliver critical services such as the Student Health Center, COVID testing centers, and custodial cleaning.

Despite the lower numbers of people and flexibility to immediately shift to remote learning, we still expect to issue inclement weather warnings and/or suspend on-campus operations. Considerations that go into a recommendation and decision include, but are not limited to the following questions: Is the campus reasonably safe for students and staff to navigate? Can the Facilities Management crews reasonably expect to keep up with the conditions expected (i.e. snow, ice, freezing conditions)? Is there enough time to clear sidewalks and parking areas before everyone gets to campus? What conditions will commuters encounter?
SNOW REMOVAL FAST FACTS

- The snow removal team consists of the 18 person Outdoor Maintenance Shop plus a volunteer team of custodians, plus anyone designated as essential personnel.
- Roughly 4 miles of streets and roads, 59 acres of parking lots, and 5.5 miles of sidewalks require snow removal and traction treatment…not to mention the dozens of stairs and building entrances which must be shoveled.

WHAT HAPPENS?

Day before:
- If the prognosis is for freezing temperatures and icy conditions, the Grounds Maintenance staff will pre-treat key areas with ice melt to mitigate the expected iciness.
- If the forecast is nearly certain for snow during the night, we will direct certain staff to come in early the next day to start snow removal.
- During the night, the University Police Department monitors conditions and asks for call-outs if needed.

Day of a storm:
- The Outdoor Maintenance Supervisor and Facilities Management Director arrive on campus between 3 and 5 AM.
- Based on current ice and snow conditions as well as the weather forecasts, the FM Director recommends to the Vice President of Business and Financial Affairs (VPBFA) a course of action – whether to remain open, to be closed, or to have a delayed opening. The VPBFA makes a recommendation to the President, who then makes a final decision. Our goal is to have a status message out by 6 AM.
- Throughout the day, conditions are monitored in case there is a need to change the status of the university. Campus members who encounter what they consider unsafe conditions are encouraged to report the location and description to Facilities Management Work Control at extension 3420.
- Human Resources will issue time keeping guidance to campus based on the particular operating status.

Other considerations:
Even if campus is open during snowy weather, campus conditions are not likely to be what everyone would consider “normal”. The Outdoor Maintenance crew will focus on accessible routes between residence halls and dining halls, accessible routes to and from academic buildings, and access to handicapped entrances. That means that individual short-cuts and secondary pathways may not be cleared unless or until the work load permits.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD YOU KNOW?

Leading up to the winter season Facilities Management stays in touch with the Disability Access Center to know where our ADA efforts may need to be focused. If and when more activities are allowed on campus, we will also make contact with organizers of special events to determine what actions may be needed to keep those events running.

Western stresses that individuals must make their own decisions on whether to travel to Western during bad weather based on a specific assessment of their own safety and circumstances.

For information on Western’s weather policies, transportation information, decision-making process and more, visit our weather information page online.

https://emergency.wwu.edu/inclement-weather