Welcome to the 2021-2022 winter weather season! Last year we got off pretty light in comparison to other years, but as we all know, what happened last year has little to do with what might happen this year. One thing we can always expect is something unusual!

This year, the first new wrinkle everyone may encounter is your building or work space may (emphasis intentional) feel a little colder this winter as a result of our campus-wide efforts to increase ventilation and air exchange. The higher volume of air means the heating systems have to work harder to keep air temperatures at desired levels, and in some circumstances the systems may not keep up as well as usual. Please consider bringing a sweater to campus – just in case!

In the “for what it’s worth category”, we are in a La Niña year, which generally means a wetter and cooler than normal winter. The actual form of that wetness is heavily dependent on where the jet stream happens to be – and our area is generally in the highly variable zone which is reflected in official predictions. This winter, NOAA predicts a 40-50% chance of below normal temperatures and a 50-60% chance of above normal precipitation.

WHAT TO EXPECT? Regardless of who you are or what you do, winter weather is rare enough in Bellingham to cause a lot of uncertainty and questions before and during an event. As a winter storm approaches, Facilities Management spends a lot of time monitoring various weather forecasts as we try to put together an educated assessment 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 4,000 or so students who live on campus have continued access to dining services and other key facilities.

Above all, SAFETY is the top priority. Some of the questions that have to be considered are: Is the campus reasonably safe for students and staff to navigate, albeit
under winter conditions? 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 are conditions like for our commuters outside of Bellingham?

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 cleared.

What is the Process for Snow Removal & University Status Messaging?

The day before a storm:

❄ 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, FM 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.

The day of a storm:

❄ The Outdoor Maintenance Supervisor and Facilities Management Director arrive on campus between three and five a.m.
❄ 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 a.m.
❄ 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