

WINTER WOES



Bob Dylan suggested you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. So why aren't more fleets proactive about crash reduction ahead of winter? Brian Weatherley reports

It's obvious. Fleet collision rates increase during autumn and winter. Less daylight, slippery roads, fog, high winds: the causes are well known. But can you quantify an increased risk of vehicle damage between November and March? Not without examining annual trends, and all too few fleet managers have either the time or the inclination. If more did – and created preventative risk management strategies – they'd probably have far fewer winter weather woes.

So how will you handle this year's threat of bad weather? Dr Will Murray is research director at eDriving Fleet, which provides driver safety management systems. One of its longstanding clients is BT, of which Murray says: "Over the 15 years we've monitored BT claims

information, snow and ice is a common cause of spikes in the data – as is exposure to risk. Almost all the spikes are related to poor weather or changes in the volume of work."

For Murray, there's no question that weather plays a major role in collision statistics. "Comparing BT's collision rates in 2009 and 2015, they show a similar seasonal pattern," he confirms. And ironically, service companies like BT face additional problems when the weather is bad, as more people work from home. Thus, as the upkeep of BT's broadband becomes critical, more of its vehicles are out on the roads at a time when weather conditions raise the risk of incidents.

Judging when to take pre-emptive action is a skill that fleet managers need to master, as Murray explains. "Wind is also a factor. We know of one UK logistics operator that delayed stopping its vehicles by one hour and lost six trucks, which overturned in the wind."

Could it have been avoided? What

Weather warnings online

- **Highways Agency England's website at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/highways-england has traffic information.**
- **Traffic Scotland has a weather section at <http://trafficscotland.org/weather/> while Traffic Wales www.traffic-wales.com/VoyagerNews.aspx?NEWSID=306 also has advice on winter preparation, as has Traffic Northern Ireland <http://trafficwatchni.com/emergency-news>**
- **The Met Office offers a five-day advance weather information service at www.metoffice.gov.uk/services/industry/retail/hazard. Its DemandMet Hazard forecast has been developed for logistics and health & safety departments.**

Managing risk virtually

eDriving Fleet has developed several road safety management tools, including its Virtual Risk Manager (VRM, www.virtualriskmanager.net/main) – an online system for driver risk assessment, monitoring and improvement. “VRM helps bring organisational policy to life through risk assessment, data integration [assessment, coaching, DVLA checks, fines, telematics, tachographs, etc], coaching and benchmarking,” says research director Will Murray.

“Sustaining road safety, through innovative risk-led processes, has been at the heart of our approach for 20 years. We provide research-led, yet practical, proven, long-term sustainable driver safety programs.” eDriving Fleet clients include several major own-account operators and 3PL transport fleets, including BT, Nestlé, TNT, ASDA, Royal Mail, Coca-Cola and Arval.

self-help is available? There are plenty of online information sources (see panel) that forecast inclement weather. Meanwhile, Murray insists that training and good communications are critical. And he adds: “We have our online RiskCoach module that lots of companies – including Asda Home Shopping and Nestlé – use to make their drivers aware of the risks of driving in bad weather.”

MINIMUM STANDARD

When it comes to managing road risk and reducing incidents, though, the joint HSE/DfT ‘Driving at Work’ guidance document provides a solid starting point. It also includes a section on weather. “It’s an excellent minimum standard,” states Murray. “We’d advocate its use by all organisations requiring their people to drive.”


However, while the publication offers basic advice, Murray observes that organisations need to use it. “Managers are the key in engaging their co-workers, and also at making decisions about when it’s too risky to drive.”

There’s the rub. Clearly, no guidance document can provide definitive ‘this is the time to take action’ advice. But by conducting an analysis of historic fleet collision data, examining the time of year/day, as well as the type and severity of incident, it’s possible to build a picture of which weather-based driver-training is required and when. An example might be understanding increased risks to vehicles operating on country roads. “Defensive drivers will see mud on the

roads as a risk and drive accordingly, particularly where there are lots of farm vehicles,” explains Murray.

Being able to quickly advise drivers of deteriorating weather is equally important, according to Peter Millichap, marketing director at Teletrac Navman, whose ‘Director’ telematics allows managers to stay in touch with drivers through messaging functions. Should a vehicle be involved in a collision, adds Millichap, fleet operators can use Director as well as in-cab cameras to get a picture of how the accident took place, and decide what steps need to be implemented to prevent a similar situation in future.

Ultimately, managing and allowing for problems caused by bad weather is just one part of an effective road risk management programme that any operator should have in place, stresses Murray. “The DfT has been very proactive in supporting good practice, tools, gap analysis and benchmarking. However, the challenge is always finding managers in the transport sector with enough foresight to use them and take action to minimise risks. The Occupational Road Safety Alliance’s www.fleetsafetybenchmarking.net is an excellent example, which every manager in transport should be using.”

After more than 25 years working in collision research and road risk management, Murray concludes: “The transport sector could do more to help itself. There are plenty of excellent resources out there.” 



Preparation is key

Bullwell Trailer Solutions looks after more than 5,000 trailers with mobile engineers. Managing director Gary Bulley insists the key to safe winter driving is preparation. “When bad weather is forecast, it’s even more important that drivers undertake vehicle inspections prior to driving – including ensuring lights and wipers are clean, levels are correct and tyres have a good tread depth. When faced with colder temperatures and wet weather, regular services and independent periodic checks are vital in ensuring trucks and trailers remain roadworthy.”

During winter months Bulley reports that the most common faults are in vehicle braking systems. When the temperature drops below zero, water in the air can cause systems to freeze. “Many drivers resort to putting anti-freeze down the braking lines, but there’s really no need as long as a recent service has declared the vehicle’s air-drying system is defect-free.”

And on tyres he says: “Winter roads provide little traction, so good tread depth is critical. UK law states that HGVs should have at least 1mm tread depth to ensure they have good grip. In winter, a vehicle’s braking distance is longer so I’d advise changing tyres as soon as they get any lower than 3mm.”

Ultimately, says Bulley, if trucks and trailers are serviced and tested to DVSA standards and the manufacturer’s specification, there’s no reason why they should experience severe problems during winter. “But it’s up to drivers and fleet management to ensure such standards are adhered to.”