

Road Warrior: Sweep away rooftop snow! It's the law

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ROAD WARRIOR COLUMNIST

Judging from the last snowfall, I guess not everyone got the memo — the one from Trenton after years of debate.

That would be the law making New Jersey the first state to impose fines on drivers who don't clear snow or ice from their vehicles before it flies off and inflicts damage or injury.

Statute 39:4-77.1 finally took effect just in time for the post-Christmas blizzard as well as Friday's snowfall, but that didn't stop drivers from carrying several inches of snow on roofs and hoods. As you can see from reader photos taken in such places as Fair Lawn and Woodland Park, drivers and their employers must think this new law is only advisory.

It isn't. The fine is \$25 for the first offense. Subsequent offenses can cost \$75 each. They're higher if your snow causes injury or damage — \$200 to \$1,500.

"I know someone will find an obscure law that says postal vehicles are exempt," grouched reader Don Oliver, who caught the U.S. Postal Service in the act on Dec. 27 on Sunnyside Drive in his town, Fair Lawn. "But their snow is no different from what's on anybody else's car. It can still hurt you."

Don's half right. The driver whose windshield gets caved in doesn't care whether the white glop that breaks his neck came from a truck owned by Uncle Sam or his cousin Max. Besides, the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety assures us that no federal law exempts postal vehicles. More importantly, postal policies require these trucks to be cleared of snow, according to a Postal Service spokesman.

"Safety is our first priority," he told me.

Those words must be engraved in a book that every company spokesman keeps handy. It shows up, too, in nearly every company mission statement I've ever seen. I got the same response from Aurora Gonzalez, a spokeswoman for FritoLay, whose truck was spotted — and photographed — by Pequannock reader Jerry Goebel on Route 80 east in Woodland Park on Dec. 27.

A division of PepsiCo, FritoLay is an otherwise progressive company with the nation's seventh largest commercial trucking fleet. It's also converting trucks from gasoline to battery power.

"Since safety and maintenance are priorities for us, I can tell you we do our best to integrate new state laws into our daily safety and maintenance programs," Gonzalez said from the company's Plano, Texas, headquarters.

In other words: Give us a break. There's a lag between enacting a law and implementing it. Still, with today's speedy, Internet-fueled information system, it's hard to believe that the news about 39:4-77.1, which went into effect last fall after tumultuous debate, took so long to reach Texas and Washington by Christmas.

At the least, you'd think the memo would have reached the folks who teach our youngsters to drive. But according to Joe Csencsits, that might be too high a standard, at least on Route 15 in Jefferson. That's where Joe, of Pompton Lakes, saw an instructor in a marked driving-school car teaching "a young, blond female" on Dec. 29.

"However, the instructor failed the lesson," Joe said, because "the car had snow on the roof [and] hood. Sorry I didn't think of having my passenger take a picture."

I'm sorry, too. I'm also sorry police didn't notice this violation. In 2007, when this column collected 2,000 petitions from readers calling for this law, I wish I'd suggested that the penalty for driving instructors should include license revocation.

Too harsh?

A Ridgewood reader — Mel — thinks our campaign against the Snow and Ice That Fall Twice has gone too far.

"It's time for you to check into the rubber room at Bergen Regional Medical Center," Mel said upon getting my message asking for photos of violators. "If you want pictures of SUVs in supermarket parking lots ... that's reasonable. But going after 13-foot-high trucks is ... sheer stupidity. Even if there were de-icing stations, a vehicle has to go to the station. Is he going to fly there? Do you have any idea how slippery it is on that roof?"

We've heard it all before, Mel. Big trucking firms, including A. Duie Pyle, have bought snow-cleaning equipment that frees drivers from these dizzying chores. Others can do the same. The law also allows snow-clad trucks to drive to depots for cleaning.

Making big rigs a protected class would discourage all of us from doing our share to limit this danger. Unlike Mel, other New Jersey drivers favor the snow ban by a 2-1 ratio, according to a AAA poll. But if truckers, or anyone else, can't bear to clean up, here's the best motivation:

"We don't issue warnings for this violation," said state police Capt. Frank Davis. "Drivers are expected to comply."

Road Warrior runs Wednesday, Friday & Sunday. E-mail cichowski@northjersey.com. Blog: <http://blogs.northjersey.com/blogs/roadwarrior>