

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 76 (2010)
Heft: [1]

Artikel: Wood chips replace salt and grit on icy roads
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944117>

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Wood chips replace salt and grit on icy roads

As pedestrians all over the northern hemisphere slip and slide over icy pavements this winter, an innovative Swiss manufacturer is hoping to come to their rescue.

Specially prepared wood chips, marketed under the name Stop Gliss Bio, are claimed by the maker to be both more efficient and more environmentally friendly than either the salt or the gravel traditionally used for de-icing.

The chips were pioneered two years ago in the western Swiss town of La Chaux-de-Fonds, which, at an altitude of about 1,000 metres, is known for its cold weather. Since then more and more villages and even cities have been taking an interest.

The CPAG firm which makes the chips was originally a manufacturer of industrial chemicals. But its markets crashed in 2005 and it faced closure. When the owners were looking around for a replacement product, the idea of Stop Gliss Bio was born.

It uses small, slim rectangles of wood, impregnated with magnesium chloride. They are cut to a specific size so that they can be spread by all European standard salt spreading machines.

Gravel is more or less round, so when you walk on it, it rolls under your feet and you can easily slip. When you walk on the chips, if you have just ten of them beneath your feet, even if it is minus 15 or minus 20 and there is snow or ice underneath, your feet will still hold.

The trick is that the chip slowly releases the magnesium chloride trapped in its fibres, making itself a "nest" in the ice, from which it will not move. The experience of the past two years in La Chaux-de-Fonds has shown that the surface will not refreeze for five days if it does not snow again heavily.

This contrasts with salt, which melts the ice faster, but at temperatures under about minus ten will not keep the surface unfro-

zen for more than a few hours. So salt may have to be reapplied several times a day.

While the chips are promoted as environmentally friendly in use, the raw material is also ecologically sound, as it uses timber that's left over in saw-mills. And there are some kinds of timber that are very little used in Switzerland, like poplar. The good thing about poplar is that it retains the magnesium chloride solution much better than beech does, for example. And at the end of the winter, the chips can be recycled into compost or used for energy production.

The civil engineering department of La Chaux de Fonds conducted tests to check that they did not absorb dangerous heavy metals, and found the take-up well below permitted levels.

Stop Gliss Bio is about six times more expensive than ordinary material. Put like that, it is much too expensive. But if it lasts six times longer, it is a reasonable option.

The chips are only a couple of years old, but the idea is already taking off. About 300 communes in Switzerland are customers already, and the product is gaining interest abroad as well. Tests are underway in Montreal. In February the product will be presented as a technological novelty at the International Winter Road Congress in Quebec. As demand grows abroad, production facilities could be set up under licence where they are needed.

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