

GETTING READY FOR WINTER – PART I

By: Ralph Seekins

We are having a beautiful late summer season. The leaves are turning and falling. The colors are beautiful. But, we all know this season only lasts a few weeks. By mid-October, snow will stay on the ground until sometime next April. Old man winter will soon be here for his six-month visit and now is the time to get your vehicle ready for the winter challenges. So, this week and next, we'll go over some of the preventative maintenance items that will greatly reduce the prospect of bad things happening to your vehicle this winter.

First, nearly every vehicle should have a minimum winter package that includes: either one or two (depending on engine size) engine block heaters; a battery warming blanket or plate for every battery your vehicle has (many trucks have two batteries); an engine oil pan sump heater; and a transmission pan sump heater. All these above items should have cords rated for cold weather and should be carefully routed into a single cold weather plug securely attached to the grill area of the vehicle. Even though I normally park in a heated garage overnight, I find that there are times when I absolutely need to plug my truck in to be able to start it up safely or even to start it at all. If you already have these essential items on your vehicle, now is the time to check them to make sure the cords are intact and they are all still operating properly.

Next, it's time to check your engine coolant (coolant is a mixture of anti-freeze and water) to make sure you have the right amount and the correct mixture for our Interior Alaska climate. Coolant becomes less effective with age. As a result, I recommend changing engine coolant every two years. When mixing the coolant, the target for this part of the world should be to end up with anti-freeze good down to no less than -65 Fahrenheit. We confirm the mixture using a hydrometer or refractometer. If you don't know how to check for proper coolant mixture or don't have the instruments to do so, your service provider can help you.

Next, check your vehicle's battery for age and corrosion. There is most likely a label on the top of your battery that indicates its age. A four-year-old battery is a real old-timer in Interior Alaska and, if it's getting long in the tooth, you may be very wise to replace it now. If you are keeping your current battery, it's a good idea to remove the battery cable ends and wash the battery with warm water and baking soda. Then use a wire brush with a mixture of warm water and baking soda to clean the terminals and cable ends. Re-attach and tighten the cable ends to your now clean and dry battery and coat them and all exposed metal surrounding them with a little petroleum jelly or a spray battery terminal protector available at any automotive parts store.

While you have the hood open, check the belts and hoses. All belts should be tight and have no cracks or missing sections (small cracks on the grooved side of a serpentine belt are normal). A new belt put on now has a chance to wear in before extreme cold hits. Hoses should not be squishy or cracked. A good guideline is that hoses should be replaced at least every five years. And, if you replace one hose, replace them all at the same time.

We'll stop here now and continue next week. Once again, a little preventative maintenance now will greatly reduce your chances of bad things happening to your vehicle this winter. And, as always, if you have questions or need suggestions, please feel free to stop by our Quick Lane for a no-charge check-over and recommendations.

See you next week.