

511 Nova Scotia ... Operational Experience

*By Heather Neish, 511 Administrator
Nova Scotia Department of Transportation and
Infrastructure Renewal*



<http://511.gov.ns.ca/map>

Nova Scotia 511 has been a success since its launch in January 2008. While the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal had a telephone line that the public could call for road conditions prior to launch, the call volume increased dramatically after 511 was introduced.

Over the last two years, there have been a few enhancements made to the system to make it more user-friendly to both Department staff and the public:

- 511 Mobile allows callers to check road conditions in text form using a smartphone
- Addition of new IVR lines means callers will not get a busy signal
- Field staff can update the system on their smartphone using the mobile highway update program.

In an effort to reach all Nova Scotians, the Department developed a 511 service for the deaf and hard of hearing community. By enhancing the current 511 service and making it available via TTY/TDD, the road condition information is available to the wider public. To access 511 via TTY/TDD: 1-877-355-0511.



Nova Scotia is currently developing its road mapping and is scheduled to add more road segments in the next few months. The addition of roads will expand the breadth of information available to the public.

Since its inception, there have been some challenges that have come to light. While training was provided for all field staff who are responsible for updating the system, some staff have retired or moved on from the Department, and new staff have been hired. Training is a constant necessity and must be worked into the process. Also, while the 511 system is supposed to display current information, there are times when notices become outdated but are not removed from the system. This can be partially rectified by frequent training and constant quality control; however, it is an ongoing issue.

Overall, the system has been a tremendous success. The call volumes and website hits have steadily increased and show a sharp increase in usage since launch. NS sought permission to use the U.S. logo from AASHTO, which was granted without fee. The logo is advertised around the province.

The Department strives to provide accurate 511 information to ensure safe and efficient operations on Nova Scotia's roads and highways throughout the year. The Department continues to maintain the high quality of the existing 511 system while also anticipating changes in technology and the public's requirements for 511 services.



511 Yukon ... Operational Experience

By W. P. (Wally) Hidinger, Manager Transportation Planning and Programming, and Allan Baranyk, Systems and Communication Officer Yukon Highways and Public Works

The 511 Yukon road condition information system was made available to the public on April 28, 2008. We're happy to report that operation of the system has been a very positive experience. All of the expectations created during the design and development process have been met to a very large degree. We've received encouraging comments on the new system from public, commercial and government users. We estimate that usage of our road condition reporting system by the public has roughly doubled since we initiated 511 service.

There have been some adjustments required to the system to make it more usable for our field staff, providing input and more understandable to users. The three major items modified to date include:

1. Changing the road condition descriptors to a five-level system using *good*, *fair*, *difficult*, *travel advisory*, and *closed*, and associating a colour on the web map with each condition. We now use a different colour scheme for summer and winter.
2. Separating avalanche condition information from construction information. The original thought was that the seasonal separation of these two items would allow us to use one category of descriptors, but that proved unworkable. Using a separate category allowed us to use more terms to describe each set of conditions, which has been helpful.
3. Changing the segmentation of the highways somewhat. We've now isolated some sections with particularly unique road conditions that are different from adjacent sections. As an example, a short section that ices up more often than others can now be flagged for the public.

We've also added a new feature to our system: a trip planner that gives distance and estimated travel time between any two points on our highway system.

The 18 months over which we've operated the system has taught us some things as well. We've learned that our training efforts will have to continue at regular intervals; first to ensure new staff can operate the system, and second to promote consistency in condition reporting and keep existing staff current on system changes. We've also found there is a need to carry out some day-to-day quality control activities. The most frequent occurrence is a travel advisory that isn't cancelled when the event that caused it has run its course. We also find that keeping construction information updated can be difficult. Monitoring by head office staff is used to correct any faults of this kind.

Some issues have cropped up as well, as we gain experience with our system. The first of these is a lack of standardized road condition descriptors across jurisdictions. Our definitions of road condition descriptors pop up on the web map when the user cursors over the index section. However, our definitions are different than those used elsewhere in Canada, which are all different from each other. A consistent set of colour standards for each road condition is also necessary for use in visual display channels. For long distance travellers, the different approaches are confusing, and this will get worse as all jurisdictions put 511 service in place and provide linked access. This lack of standard descriptors is also of concern for secondary roads, most of which in Yukon have gravel surfaces. There is no set of common descriptors that we can apply to these roads.

The big gains that we've made through implementing 511 are in two areas. First, the travelling public now receives more accurate and timelier road condition information that is much easier to access. Second, our field staff can now provide the input data on road conditions much more quickly and easily than was possible in the past, freeing up some of their time to concentrate on the business of road maintenance.

We hope to add features to our system and improve the level of service we offer the public in future years.