

SPINNING TIRES ON ICE



Ralph Seekins

So, on my way to work last week, I stopped about third in line at a stop light. When the light turned green, the driver in the car in front of me madly spun his vehicle's tires peppering gravel all over the front end of my truck. Sure enough, a little chip immediately appeared on my windshield. "Cheechako!" I muttered to myself. "Anyone who has spent a winter or two in Interior Alaska knows that madly spinning the tires is the worst way to try to get started on icy roads."

Then, later in the week, I got a call from a "Sourdough" named J.W. who asked me to remind drivers how to take advantage of the gravel build-ups along the roads and at intersections when starting or stopping during our Interior Alaska winter months. A good idea and I thank him for it. Hopefully, so will you.

Traction is when a vehicle's tires grip the roadway surface and allow the vehicle to move forward, turn or stop. The less traction, the more likely it is that the vehicle will spin the tires while starting, slide while stopping, or skid sideways while turning. The two main factors affecting traction are

friction and gravity. Gravity gives the vehicle weight and, generally, the more weight on a tire, the greater the potential for friction between the tire and the surface on which it is driven. The moment a tire starts to spin or slide, friction is reduced and, thus, there is an accompanying loss of traction. Suddenly it's harder to start, stop or turn.

Tires already have reduced traction on wet, muddy or icy roads. Spinning them or locking them up so they slide causes an even greater traction loss and is the cause of lots of trips to the collision repair shops in Interior Alaska.

Because of our sustained cold weather, salt on the roadways doesn't work here like it does in most of the lower 48 states. It just doesn't melt snow and ice at our temperatures. Instead, we spread pea gravel sized crushed rock as a traction enhancer to help folks stay on the road and stop and go at intersections. And, because the traffic movement tends to push the gravel out of the highly traveled lanes, there is a build-up of gravel along each side of the slicked over portion of the roadway.

Knowing this, when I come to an intersection where I have to stop quickly, i.e., when a yellow light suddenly shows up as I approach an intersection, I move over just a little bit to ride my truck's tires on the graveled area. It makes stopping much more

predictable and a whole lot safer. This maneuver can normally (and should always) be done without leaving the lane in which I was traveling.

And, when I get ready to start up, I once again try to line up with a part of my lane where there is some gravel laying there. Then, I "feather" the throttle peddle as I get started - doing my best not to spin the tires. Why not spin the tires? Because as soon as I spin on ice I've lost the traction battle and I have to start all over again. Sliding traction is really no traction at all compared to rolling traction. And, by starting properly I'm never the guy peppering the front end of the vehicle behind me when I do find some gravel.

If you've been around the Interior very long, you probably already know what I'm talking about and take advantage of the gravel strips along the roadway. If not, give it a try. You may just avoid a trip to the collision repair shop for you and/or someone else.

Ralph Seekins has more than 42 years' experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past

36 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln, Inc.

If you have an automotive question you'd like answered, forward it to ralphs@seekins.com.