WINTER WOES HANDLING FREEZUPS

Frederick R. Holley | Circuit Rider III

As I sit looking out my office window at the bright blue sky and the greenery, it is hard to imagine that in a few short weeks it will all change. The blue sky will remain the same, but it will be cold and crisp instead of warm. It feels like we just left winter and now soon it will be knocking at our doors. When you read this winter will be here. With the winter and the cold, returns the threat of frozen service lines and worse, frozen fire hydrants and water mains. In my area near Rochester, NY, 7 ft. of frost is not unheard of, especially in bare areas. Years ago as an operator, when a call came in for no water, a technician would be dispatched to determine the cause. Questions would be asked to determine the severity of the freeze up. Many times it would be found that part of the house had water. Time to call a plumber. If there was no water at all the meter would be pulled to determine if it was internal or external. In our municipality it was the homeowner's responsibility from the house to the curb stop. On occasion we would excavate the curb stop to determine if there was water on "our" side. On many occasions, the superintendent would send us out with the welder to thaw the service, even if it was on the customers side. Customer service was what it was all about.

To thaw with a welder, not recommended, you really must know what you are doing. High amperage is the key in this method of thawing, but it can short out electrical systems grounded to water pipes. Improper electrical thawing has resulted in many total fire losses and countless smaller property claims for damaged buildings, appliances, electronics, etc. There is also the possibility of accidental electrocution. Before thawing with a welder, the property owner must be informed of the risks involved and required to sign a waiver. This waiver absolves the utility in case of accident or damage. If the thawing is done on the customers property, the utility must have written confirmation from its insurer stating that adequate liability insurance is in effect to cover possible consequences of the work. (AWWA)

Photo 1

The safer, preferred method to thaw a service would be with a hot water unit. (Photo 1) In writing this article, I reached out to Micah Cohen from Magikist LTD for information on the unit shown. This unit and others use a stream of pre-heated water through a potable water tubing to get you to the frozen spot. The tubing is designed to pass through the curb stop. Once the pipe thaws, the tubing is pulled out and the valve closed. (Photo 2) This can be a one person operation and is many times done by a plumber. Many municipalities will do this because their priorities are safe water and customer satisfaction.

If these are not an option, a hose bib to hose bib connection with a hose designated for potable water can be used. It is common practice to not bill the customer when this type of connection is used since the customer on the receiving end will have to keep a faucet running to prevent freezing. With any type of thawing it is important to leave a faucet running to prevent freezing. Don't be fooled by a sunny day, the sun pushes the frost deeper.

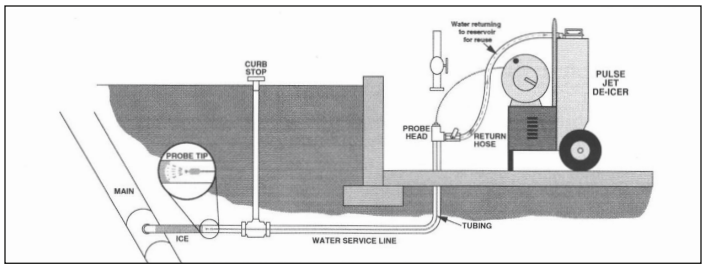

Photo 2

Hydrants are an important item any time of year. Maintaining proper records of hydrants that do not drain is important. These hydrants should be pumped dry and tagged as winterized after each use. It falls back on the operator when a hydrant is found frozen in time of need. Frozen hydrants should be thawed and pumped when found. Many a time I have seen a hydrant shielded from the wind with a smudge pot burning trying to thaw it. The most efficient way to thaw is with a steam pot. A propane burner heats a water kettle forming steam which is forced through the ice, thawing the hydrant. (Photo 3) When thawed, the hydrant needs to be pumped and tagged to prevent future freezing.

Photo 3

Remember, if you "unthaw" something you freeze it.

I hope to see you in my travels.