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Need To Know

Hanging iron

Chaining up should be seen as a kind of philosophy. You can know every nuance of every law in every region, but it all comes down to common sense.

By Tim Barton
Special to *Land Line*

There are those among the ranks of driving professionals who have never hung iron and never will.

Their philosophy is that if the roads are bad enough to chain up, then it's time to get off.

If you're not used to hanging iron, and most folks aren't, it can be a learning experience fraught with deep frustrations and very cold fingers. Even the old hands can be tempted to believe the snow will soon run out and those chains will have to come off again.

The problem is the dang law. You can be fined for not carrying the right amount of chains, the wrong kind of chains, for not using your chains, not having them on the proper wheels, or using them on dry pavement, depending on the states in which you travel.

The chain cops don't give a hoot about your philosophy. So, say you get stuck between pit stops somewhere up near Donner without chains and you can't find a place to pull off or you don't have them with you. You may not be hanging iron, but you're going to hang if the chain cops find you.

Stay legal, keep rolling

This may be obvious, but you don't have to worry about chains in Florida. Less obviously, states like West Virginia, which can be as treacherous as Colorado, don't get involved in your chain-hanging decisions. And in Michigan, chains are illegal. If you run to the West Coast from anywhere east of the Rockies, however, you will want to know when and where the law requires you to carry and/or hang iron. The fleets supply their company trucks with enough chain to cover the laws wherever they run. Depending on what fleet an owner-operator may be leased to, the kindness of the company heart may extend to their needs as well. It is a good idea to check this out.

Rather than concern yourself to know every nuance of every state chain law west of Denver, find out what your fleet does and go with that. If you're not leased to a company, well, you've got to find resources of your own. There are Web sites where you can look up individual states' requirements. (See box below.)

So, let's say you are the common sense sort of driver, the best kind, and you aren't hooked up to the World Wide Web and don't want to be. You run all 48 because you want to live by your wits and your will. You want to survive, or not,

because you saw all those cowboy movies when you were a kid and you still believe that cowboys git 'er done.

Well, good for you. Let's just not get self-righteous about how common-sensical we are. "Pride goeth before a fall," as the Good Book says.

There is nothing more common-sensical than hanging iron. Your common sense tells you that preparing for the worst will keep you out of chain law trouble and moving when the snow pack turns the super slab into a toboggan run.

When and where you need them

Now you have your chains and are running hard toward the Shaky. It's Oct. 31. Do you need chains in the states you're running through? Only one state, Washington, gives dates – Nov. 1 through April 1. But if you need chains to navigate through bad weather you can be sure the chain cops will let you know. So if it's likely you're going to run into weather, having your full complement of iron is a good idea. For example, it is snowing on Snoqualmie, hard enough to kick your common sense into gear. You need chain no matter what the law says. Now is the time to drag out the handy dandy chart supplied here. You don't want to hang more chain than necessary, so depending on the state you're in, the chart can save you considerable labor. Of course, you may decide it's safest to use all your chain. That would be good.

Or let's say you have pulled over in a safe location to chain up and your iron is hung. It has snowed even more while you were chaining up and you are back in the seat and pulling out onto snow pack. You feel good. Your chains are rattling reassuringly and there is nothing to worry about now because the chain is biting deep into the snow. Well, maybe.

Every tool has its limitations

Chains are no different than any other safety device – being overconfident because you have just chained up can be a big mistake, according to the experts. In British Columbia, where grades can be 14 percent and higher, hanging iron is a way of life. On Rossland grade, a 10 percent southbound downhill north of Kelowna, Patrick Peters was pulling 160 tons of wood chips in a Super B. I watched him put chains on the drives at Texas Point in less than 15 minutes. We had lost traction headed up and were not going to move unless iron was attached to rubber. The chains got us going again, but Patrick drove as if he didn't have them on.

"You don't put demands on chains that chains cannot meet," he said.

Peters is an instructor at Mountain Driving Institute in Kelowna, British Columbia. He is an old hand in the Canadian Rockies. Chains are a necessity there and Peters is constantly hanging and unhooking it. But whether he has his chains installed or he doesn't, he drives the mountains using the same rule book.

"Brakes are meant to stop your vehicle," he said, "not control speed."

And if Peters uses his brakes on the high-percentages downhills, it is a unique and fleeting occurrence.

"I do not shift on grades, chained up or not," he said. "I customize my driving to suit the terrain and plan gear selection far in advance of changes in grade. The wrong gear can break traction as easily as shifting can."

Peters is also aware of the details. He points out a number of corners where the shadows of trees might have formed black ice, where even chains do no good, and points out that trees below the road level on the left side signal a descending left-hand curve.

"I see yellow signs up ahead and I know I need to grab a couple of gears to slow down."

Peters already knows what the signs mean before I can read them. He knows by their shape, size and color.

That kind of awareness is necessary when the weather goes north and relying on Jakes and chains is counterproductive, not to say stupid. If you run the same road plenty, you can build up information about the road that can help you out in trying circumstances. But driving along fat, dumb and happy listening to your Jake snort and your chains rattle will not give you that cushion.

It also pays to be aware of your weight and configuration. Running heavy most of

the time can get you through plenty of situations in which an empty or light trailer will leave the pavement. Your decision to chain or not to chain may be influenced by weight, axle configuration and tire type.

Running with chains should be done at speeds lower than 30 mph on snow and chains need to be removed when the road clears.

Watch signs, watch the weather

There are as many laws about improper chain use as there are about not having them or not using them. Most states provide signage to tell drivers when and where to chain, but being aware of the weather is your best bet. Signs can be snow-covered or out of date. Use your weather channel and Channel 9.

In the end, all the laws in the Rockies don't mean a thing if you run into a bad spot and aren't chained up. The key is not the law. It's the conditions under which you have to drive. But knowing the law can help when the chain cops are out.

Tim Barton is a freelance writer and trucker. He can be reached at t7bart@aol.com.

Editor's note: Tim Barton is also an OOIDA member. During the past two years, he has ridden and driven trucks in 40 countries on six continents. You can read about this project and others on these blogs: theroadaround.blogspot.com, ifyoudrive.blogspot.com and globalsynapse.blogspot.com.

Wheel Positions for Chain Installment

M	I	E	A	.
N	J	F	B	
O	K	G	C	
P	L	H	D	
				.

California A,B,C,D,E,H,M,P
 Colorado A,B,C,D
 Montana A,D or E,H
 Nevada Two drive wheels and two braking wheels of trailer
 Oregon A,B,D,J,P (any two trailer wheels, either axle either side) or A,D,E,H (if power to both axles)
 Utah One set of chains for drive axle recommended
 Washington A,B,C,D,P or A,D,E,H,P

This is a quickie chart for states that specify chain placement. It's not intended to be a complete advisory of chain requirements.

If you're wired

The truckersplace.com offers summaries of state laws.

The thetruckersreport.com is an excellent source for state phone numbers and a summary of state requirements.

Donde Publishing offers good info for truckers on their Web site, dondepublishing.com, where you'll find their winter chain law advisory. This is the article that Don and Debbe Morrow wrote for the October 2005 issue of *Land Line*.

For the most complete rundown of state law – every state is listed, even Hawaii – go to flextrax.com.

Be prepared

There are just a few things you need to do to be prepared for every legal and practical eventuality.

1 Carry at least 10 chains. California can require eight, and also require them on specific wheel positions. (See chart on Page 101.) If you have eight you're covered

everywhere. Carrying an extra two will make sure you can replace broken chains, which inspectors do not include when they're counting.

2 Pre-fit your chains before getting into the snow. Fit is key to performance. Tires vary according to manufacturer, age, tread and type, according to thetruckersreport.com. Carry adjusters to keep chains tight.

3 If you can, hang chains from the belly of your trailer where you can get at them. Unkink chains before installing.

4 Carry coveralls and more than one set of gloves.

5 Cable is legal in some places, not in others. To be sure, carry chain, not cable. Yes, chain is heavier, weighing about 51 pounds per pair of singles and 92 pounds per pair of duals to 18 pounds and 35 pounds for cable, again according to thetruckersreport.com, but the weight gain provides peace of mind.

6 If you have never hung iron, consider asking someone who has and get a lesson where it's nice and dry. At the very least, do it once or twice to prepare yourself.

7 Lubricate your chains when you take them off.



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1 NW OOIDA Drive | Grain Valley, Missouri 64029
1-800-444-5791 | (816) 229-5791