



Oregon Department of Transportation

NEWS RELEASE

Region 4 Wasco, Sherman, Gilliam, Jefferson, Wheeler,
Deschutes, Crook, Klamath and Lake Counties

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Heavy snowpack, bridge project to keep McKenzie Pass Highway (OR242) closed to all traffic

Heavy snowpack likely to keep east side of highway closed until at least July

Bend – A stubborn snowpack with depths reaching 30 feet in some locations may keep the east side of the highway closed until at least the first part of July, possibly later. A safety project to replace two bridges on the west side will keep OR 242 closed for much of the summer.

Following a harsh winter in which snowpack in the Cascades exceeded 200 percent of average, snow depths ranging from 5 feet up to 30 feet remain on the historic highway. That snowpack, which includes dozens of downed trees at varying depths, has hindered efforts to clear a path from the west gate at White Branch (milepoint 61.9) east to the first bridge slated for replacement (milepoint 66.7). The second bridge scheduled for replacement this summer is at milepoint 68.4.

The project's sponsors – the Willamette National Forest, ODOT and the Federal Highway Administration -- had hoped to clear a path in April to allow the contractor to begin preliminary work on the bridge replacements in early May.

ODOT typically waits until the snowpack averages about 5 feet in depth before beginning snow-clearing operations. In some years, the work starts in late April. In other years when the snowpack is deeper than normal, clearing doesn't begin until July. In 1999, for example, the highway was not reopened to vehicle traffic until July 29. This winter's snowpack, in addition to continuing early May snowfall at elevations above 3,500, exceeds the depths encountered in 1999.

While westbound plowing has yet to begin, eastbound ODOT snow blowers started clearing the highway at White Branch on May 7. Under the best conditions, the plows can clear about three-fourths of a mile per day. Given the deep snowpack and the frequent delays caused when the plows reach a downed tree that must be cleared, it is unlikely the bridge replacement project will make substantial progress until mid-June. During the bridge replacement project, which will cost about \$800,000, no vehicle or bicycle traffic will be allowed on the west side of the McKenzie Pass for safety reasons. Officials hope to open the west side highway for traffic by Sept. 1.

Depending on the weather in June and the rate of snow melt, ODOT plows could start clearing a path from the east snow gate near Sisters up to the Dee Wright Observatory sometime in July. Access to the Obsidian Trailhead and Scott Lake will depend on weather and the pace of snow melt. The east side highway is blown open with a snow blower 9 feet wide and the remainder of snow is allowed to melt naturally. During this time, the highway is a popular route for bicyclists. This year however, the U.S. Forest Service will be cutting dead "hazard" trees along the roadway, causing it to be closed even to bicyclists for a period of time. The hazard tree removal cannot begin until ODOT clears the highway and the snow drifts along the shoulder have melted.

The bridge replacements that will take place this summer represent the second phase of a three-year, \$3.8 million improvement project jointly administered by the FHWA, U.S. Forest Service and ODOT. During the summer of 2007, this included the

improvement of Dead Horse Grade (at milepoint 69). This work cut back the slope and realigned the highway, making the road more stable and safe for all users. The work in 2009, which marks the third and final phase, includes a 15.5-mile pavement overlay, culvert installation and shoulder stabilization.

The highway closed for the 2007-08 winter on Nov. 1. The longest closure period occurred during the winter of 1998-1999, when the highway was closed for 256 days. The shortest closure period occurred during the winter of 1933-1934, when the highway closed for 96 days.

The first route over the McKenzie Pass, known as Craig's McKenzie Salt Springs/Deschutes Wagon Road, was completed in 1872. This toll road connected the Willamette Valley with Camp Polk, near what is now Sisters. The charge was \$2 for a wagon drawn by two horses, \$2.50 for a wagon with four horses, \$1 for a man on a horse and 10 cents each for loose cattle and horses.

Modern construction techniques allowed crews to rebuild the road in the 1920s. At that time, the McKenzie Pass Highway was built and the former wagon route was abandoned, except in places where the new highway followed the same path. In 1962 the Clear Lake-Belknap Springs section of OR 126 was completed, giving motorists a new, straighter, year-round alternative for travel between the Willamette Valley and Central Oregon.

Even during its tenure as the main route between the southern Willamette Valley and Central Oregon, the narrow, twisting roadway and high elevation (5,325 feet) made the highway too difficult to maintain and keep clear during the winter months.

##ODOT##