

## Tips on how skiers can beat traffic snarls on I-70

KEVIN FLYNN  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS.

Winter has returned to Interstate 70, where rush-hour level weekend ski traffic often meets Mother Nature in a most unfriendly way.

With billions of dollars in ideas for improvements but dwindling money to pay for them, the Colorado Department of Transportation will give travelers to the ski resorts and other winter destinations another season of resourceful but less-costly ways to keep traffic moving.

Some strategies are high tech but lead back to the same recommendation: find another time to be on the highway.

CDOT provides online access to real-time cameras and travel speeds, as well as roadside message signs advising about potential delays. All that is directed at informing drivers wondering whether to leave early or stay a little later.

"It's better to be sitting in a nice restaurant in Summit County killing some time than to be sitting in your car on the highway not moving," said Bernie Guevara, CDOT regional traffic engineer covering the I-70 mountain corridor.

Closures on I-70, whether for snow, ice or accidents, are frequent. In November, CDOT closed parts of the highway 18 times - five of them occurring over the Thanksgiving weekend. Guevara said CDOT's measures have helped cut the average closure time from 52 minutes last year to 27 minutes so far this year.

Flo Raitano, director of the I-70 Coalition, said there is more traffic on the highway in the summer, but weather is rarely a factor then. In winter, traffic tends to bunch together westbound on Saturday mornings and eastbound on Sunday afternoons as Front Range residents and visitors make their way up and back for weekend getaways.

"This past holiday weekend is the perfect example," Raitano said. "An overwhelming number of visitors to the high country wanting to get back down to the Front Range in a short period of time gets thrown a curve ball by Mother Nature in the form of four feet of snow at the Eisenhower- Johnson Memorial Tunnels."

The key to helping drivers, said Frisco Town Manager Michael Penny, is finding ways to get accurate real-time travel information to people at a time when it's useful to them - before they're on the highway stuck in traffic.

Penny said there are plans to make traffic information available on changeable signs at resort lift stations and by text messages to cell phones so skiers can decide whether to take a few more runs to let traffic calm down, or leave early to beat the rush.

To address truck incidents, CDOT has introduced a heavy-towing program and a pilot program to assist truckers in buying, installing and removing chains.

Operated on weekends and holidays, CDOT pays three crews with heavy-duty tow trucks to station along the highway between Floyd Hill and Vail Pass.

"It's not cheap," Guevara said. "We're paying as much as \$390 an hour to have them over there. But that cuts down on the time for having to call them to the scene."

The trucks handled 58 calls for trucks last weekend.

### On the road: Tips

Looking to drive I-70 into the mountains on the weekends? Here are some tips for surviving rush hour to the resorts.

\* Leave early, stay late. This is the most basic tip. CDOT's hourly traffic counts at the Eisenhower Tunnel show the busiest times on the highway are Saturdays around 8 a.m. and Sundays from 2 p.m. onward. To beat the rush, leave by 6 a.m. Saturday. To avoid the Sunday crunch, stay for dinner and leave at 6 p.m.

\* For those who don't mind going late, leave Saturday after noon. To beat the crowd back on Sunday, you'll have to leave by 1 p.m.

\* If you're in Summit County, ask your restaurant, hotel or lounge manager to tune in local Channel 22, where the county runs live feeds from CDOT's 19 traffic cameras between Vail and Idaho Springs. It shows the real-time estimate of travel time to Denver along with weather conditions.

\* Go online to CoTrip.org, CDOT's travel information page, for up-to-date closure information and real-time data, including a link that lets you read what's currently being displayed on all 20 overhead message signs along the corridor.

\* On the drive home, jump on the U.S. 40 frontage road at Georgetown (exit 228) and stay with it until it merges back into I-70 east of Idaho Springs (exit 241). But be prepared for a gamble as traffic can back up there, too. You need to go slow through the towns and wait in line at the ramp meter at Idaho Springs.



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