

Ski industry, truckers at odds over Hickenlooper I-70 restriction idea

By **DAVID O. WILLIAMS** 9/24/10 12:26 PM

VAIL — We all know who wins when an SUV loaded with skiers tangles with a tractor trailer out on the open road on an icy winter day in the Rocky Mountains. The resulting carnage sometimes shuts down high-country highways for hours at a time. There are only losers in such a scenario.

Could I-70 gridlock be fixed by restricting truck traffic? (Photo courtesy of i70solutions.org)

But who wins politically in the battle for supremacy between skier traffic and the state's trucking industry? That's a question brought up earlier this month in the Colorado governor's campaign when Democratic Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper suggested trucking traffic should be somehow curtailed during the peak weekend skier rush between the Front Range and the mountain resorts along Interstate 70

Hickenlooper told the Colorado Independent that the ability to get quickly from urban areas into the mountains is "what makes Colorado Colorado. That's what makes us different." He recommended the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) look at banning westbound truck traffic on Friday afternoons and eastbound trucks on Sunday afternoons.

Not surprisingly, ski industry and trucking industry representatives contacted by the Colorado Independent have widely divergent views on the topic.

"Mayor Hickenlooper's idea that truck restrictions be explored deserves consideration as well," said Melanie Mills, president and CEO of Colorado Ski Country USA, the statewide ski industry lobbying group. "On-time [freight] deliveries are important to all, including ski areas, so this would have to be done thoughtfully and strategically."

Greg Fulton of the Colorado Motor Carriers Association trucking lobby said such a proposal could have dramatic economic impacts, impeding on-time deliveries both in Colorado and across the nation and adding costs not only for truckers but also the many businesses that rely on prompt freight deliveries.

"Last year was probably one of the lowest freight volumes and number of trucks out on that [I-70] corridor [because of the recession], and we still ended up seeing significant issues and it really didn't have much to do with trucks," Fulton said. "You just have a substantial volume of people traveling up to the ski areas in the state, and the issue that needs to be dealt with is how do you better disperse or distribute that part of it."

Not to worry, according to a CDOT representative who told the Colorado Independent that Hickenlooper's idea wouldn't fly anyway.

"It's not going to happen," said CDOT spokesman Bob Wilson, who added federal laws prohibit such restrictions on truckers, who pay a large share of the taxes for the highways and "have the same rights as anyone else."

But **a CalTrans spokesman told the Colorado Independent** that California, under an agreement struck with the major trucking companies in that state, has been restricting truck traffic on I-80 over Donner Pass since the 1960s. That stretch of interstate connects Sacramento to the ski areas in and around Lake Tahoe.

"We try not to mix trucks and tourists when the weather is bad," CalTrans spokesman Mark Dinger said, adding the state provides parking areas and can ticket truckers who violate the ban.

Colorado's trucking lobby spokesman Fulton discounts what's being done along I-80 in California: "It's a very minor thing. It's not anything close to what we have up there [on I-70]. It isn't even proximate."

He suggests the ski industry needs to do more to limit the skier traffic on peak weekends.

"Maybe they need to take a page out of what some of the gambling areas have looked at, which is providing incentives for people to get up there earlier or leave later, essentially providing greater incentives for people to ski during the week and other things," Fulton said.

Colorado Ski Country's Mills said that's already being done.

"Ski areas are and will continue to offer great incentives to off-peak skiers, but the Monday to Friday work and school week and limited hours of winter daylight place very real limits on the ability of Front Range skiers to move to off-peak times," Mills said. "The fact is, we have to look at realistic, incremental improvement strategies for the corridor and implement them now."

Some observers are concerned that a **preferred CDOT alternative** for improvements along I-70 released earlier this month is too pie-in-the-sky and will obscure more practical short-term fixes like Hickenlooper's idea.

The CDOT plan calls for \$20 billion in improvements over the next 40 years, including \$10 billion for high-speed rail. It would involve interchange improvements, widening some sections and adding more tunnel capacity in places. However, **funding remains a huge question mark** for any of the components of the CDOT plan.

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