



- Special to the Daily / CDOT

I-70 closure a pain for Summit County businesses

Shutdown from Georgetown to Silverthorne set to begin Tuesday morning

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Crews are set to move forward Tuesday with a rockfall mitigation project that will close down Interstate 70 for at least one and possibly two days.

The Colorado Department of Transportation will shut the highway down in both directions at 9 a.m. Tuesday from Empire Junction, the Highway 40 exit, to the Silverthorne exit. If work is not complete by 5 p.m. the same stretch will be closed Wednesday from 9 a.m. until

5 p.m. while the project continues.

"We know this closure will have major impacts, but the safety of the traveling public is always our first priority," CDOT region 1 director Tony DeVito stated in a recent release. "These boulders have the potential to come down on their own and we need to remove them before that happens. The highway has to be closed for this work, but unfortunately we won't know exactly how long it's going to take until the work actually begins."

Crews will be working to remove a cluster of about 40 large boulders, situated about 300 feet above the highway near Georgetown, that threaten to fall on I-70 or nearby residences, CDOT officials said. People living in the five houses near the project will be evacuated during the work as a precaution.

The closure comes at the tail end of the busy spring ski season and is causing headaches for local businesses and their guests.

"We are very concerned because we do have people coming in and out (on those days)," Beaver Run spokesman Bruce Horii said. "I always think that there're different timing opportunities, but you would never want to err on the side of being wrong when you have big boulders up there ready to pounce."

Horii said the resort is trying to communicate with their guests about the closure and work with them on tweaking travel times.

The closure will also take a toll on the trucking industry, impacting costs and scheduling.

"I-70 is a critical thoroughfare and closing (the highway) even for a day makes it very difficult," Colorado Motor Carriers Association president Greg Fulton told the Vail Daily. "We have only two major east-west cross-country routes, I-70 and I-80, that actually work."

But many in the local business community say a temporary closure is better than a rockfall disaster, and relatively, Tuesday and Wednesday are good days to have it happen.

"It's a better scenario than having (rocks) fall in the middle of I-70 and then having a permanent closure of lanes for a month," said Ken Nelson, local restaurant owner and president of the Breckenridge Restaurant Association. "It would have been nice to do it in May when it's even slower, but if they feel they've got to do it now, they've got to do it now."

CDOT officially announced the closure early last week, saying the project had been delayed because helicopters, needed to deliver materials to the worksite, had been unavailable due to recent wildfires.

There are two alternative, though longer, routes around the closure to the Front Range. Drivers who have to

travel during the closure can take I-70 to U.S. 40 over Berthoud Pass to Kremmling and then take state Highway 9 to Silverthorne, a 73 mile trip, or U.S. 285 southwest to Fairplay, taking Hwy. 9 over Hoosier pass to I-70 in Frisco, a 101 mile trip.

Transportation officials said the closure has to be during the day, as the work can't be done in the dark, and needs to be completed as soon as possible for safety reasons.

"There's never a good time to have a full closure of I-70, especially during the daytime," DeVito stated. "But we need to get this done now because it's the time of year we experience the recurring freeze and thaw along with those wet snows that make the mountainous areas more susceptible to rockfall. We cannot delay this ... We will not risk public safety."

Up-to-date information during the project available via text or e-mail alerts. Sign up at www.coloradodot.info and click on the cellphone icon in the upper right corner. Highway information is also available by calling 511.

The Vail Daily contributed to the reporting of this story.

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