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I-70: Going gets tougher

The highway has been hammered since fall, as seen in crashes and closings, especially at Vail Pass.

By Steve Lipsher
The Denver Post

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Traffic was stuck on I-70 West near Lookout Mountain in early March. CDOT has spent more than \$14 million plowing I-70 this winter. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

It has been another hard winter of driving through the mountains on Interstate 70, with 70 road closings for weather, accidents and trailer-truck incidents, according to state figures.

And perhaps the toughest stretch of them all has been Vail Pass — scene of a 75-car pileup last Monday.

"This year, there have been 20 closures," Vail

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Councilman Andy Daly said, "versus three last year. It's been a dramatic increase. I don't know what's going on."

One element was the winter storms that hammered Vail. Vail Valley usually gets about 350 inches of snow, Daly said, but 400 inches has already fallen this winter.

"We've had way more snow this year" on I-70, said Stacey Stegman, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Transportation.

"It's real difficult to compare on a year-by-year basis because it all depends on the types of storms and the amount of snow," Stegman said.

Through mid-March, the agency had spent \$14 million in plowing this winter, up from \$12.1 million last year and \$10.8 million the year before, according to Stegman.

CDOT has plowed the equivalent of 1.3 million miles on I-70 this winter, Stegman said. That's the same as CDOT plows driving around Earth's equator 53 times.

State Sen. Dan Gibbs, who commutes daily from his home in Silverthorne to the state capitol during the legislative session, said many motorists simply refuse to heed slick conditions.

Last year, the Democrat passed a bill that boosted the fines against truckers for chain-law violations, created new chain-up areas and signs, and established contracts with towing companies to be on standby during bad weather.

"When I introduced the chain-law bill last year, I-70 had been shut down over 116 times because of noncompliance (with) the chain law," he said.

Through January, the Colorado State Patrol had cited 38 truckers for driving without chains, and only four of them were responsible for closing the road, Trooper Ryan Sullivan said.

"The

No spinning wheels

Hours of closures on Interstate 70, from September to April, for weather and accidents:

Year	Total	Wrecks
2004-05	99	75
2005-06	121	86
2006-07	161	73
2007-08	228	123

Source: Colorado Department of Transportation

click on image to enlarge (The Denver Post)

big thing that I attribute that to is the new law," Sullivan said.

Penalties for driving without chains when they are required rose to \$500 from \$100, and fines for closures doubled to \$1,000, Sullivan said.

"The stricter penalty," he said, "has been a deterrent."

There were only eight road closures involving semi-trucks between September and April — the period CDOT tallies for winter closures.

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During the 2006-07 winter, there were 19 truck-related closings, according to state figures.

Gibbs said he sees greater compliance with the chain law but notes that traffic continues to increase, putting pressure on the highway.

January traffic heading west through the Eisenhower Tunnel, for example, reached 515,627 vehicles, an 11.4 percent jump from 2005, he said.

While closures are often measured in financial costs — as much as \$1 million in lost business for each hour — Daly said it has also become a public-safety issue.

Last week's chain-reaction crash, which began when a tractor-trailer jackknifed as it descended to Vail, closed I-70 for almost eight hours.

One person was killed, 22 were injured and an ambulance could not get through the stalled traffic, Daly said.

"We put a lot of resources on I-70 because we recognize its importance," CDOT's Stegman said. "But I would venture to guess there's not anywhere in the state where someone doesn't think snow-removal efforts are not good enough."

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