
Plan moves snowbound truckers off I-70

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DENVER — When snow shuts down Vail Pass this winter, truckers will be required to get off Interstate 70 and wait out the closure about 60 miles away in Dotsero. It's part of a new plan to stop eastbound trucks from parking along the highway and prevent bottlenecks when the road is reopened.



- Summit Daily File Photo

A trucking trade group backs the idea and helped state transportation officials promote the new program by passing out about two dozen new care packages to truckers on Friday at the newly expanded bad-weather parking lot in Dotsero. The care packages contain snacks like Oreos, beef jerky and trail mix that were donated by sponsors and will be delivered to truckers waiting out closures of five hours or more.

"I'm sure they hope that they won't have to use them this winter, but we know that will probably happen," said Nancy Shanks, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Transportation.

Last winter, snow shut down Vail Pass 17 times. Shanks said at least one of those closures required the pass to be closed overnight so crews could perform avalanche control work the next morning.

Congestion along the state's main east-west highway is a perennial problem, and things can get even worse following long weather closures. This year, mountain towns, CDOT, the Colorado Motor Carriers Association and others have worked out a plan they hope will get traffic moving more quickly once the road is cleared.

When Vail Pass is shut down, variable electronic highway signs will tell truckers they must pull off and park at Dotsero, where the parking lot and nearby roadways can accommodate 300 trucks. CDOT will provide portable toilets along with the snack packages, which were assembled at the Johnson's Corner truck stop in northern Colorado.

When the highway is cleared to be reopened, CDOT will open the road in stages, starting with vehicles closest to the closure. That means truckers waiting at Dotsero will be among the last to get back on the road, but Greg Fulton, president of the Colorado Motor Carriers Association, said truckers want to give it a try. Until now, truckers have been forced to park along I-70, which can make it harder for emergency vehicles as well as plows to get through, delaying the reopening of the road.

"The ultimate goal here is safety, and we think this plan contributes to it," Fulton said.

Trucks are also required to chain up their tires during bad weather, and the state has added more areas for them to put on their chains. Two drivers were killed in a two-year span while chaining up along the roadway, Fulton said.

Johnson's Corner owner Chauncey Taylor suggested the care package idea because there are no truck stops in the Vail area, and he didn't want to see the state try to open a rest area of its own and compete with businesses along the I-70 corridor. However, he said if the 300 packages go quickly, it might make sense for the state to contract with a local company to provide more care packages during long closures.

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