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July 10, 2007

Chain law bill moves to Senate floor

By [NICOLE FORMOSA](#)[summit daily news](#)

April 19, 2007

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DENVER — A bill aimed at reducing wintertime interstate closures continues to chug along through the legislative process, gaining Senate committee approval Thursday and moving to the Senate floor.

House Bill 1229, sponsored by Rep. Dan Gibbs, D-Silverthorne, in the House and by Senate President Joan Fitz-Gerald, D-Coal Creek Canyon, in the Senate, breezed through the Senate Transportation Committee on Thursday with unanimous approval.

Before casting their votes, committee members heard about an hour of testimony in support of the once-controversial bill, much of which came from Summit County locals who traveled to Denver to champion the legislation.

The bill proposes to raise the fines for commercial truck drivers who neglect to chain their trucks when the chain law is in effect from \$100 to \$500. If that driver's negligence results in a blocked lane of traffic, the penalty would be \$1,000, double the current citation.

"The bill is making the stakes higher for folks who disregard the chain law," said Arapahoe Basin vice president and chief operating officer Alan Henceroth, speaking on behalf of the ski area and Colorado Ski Country USA. "The chain law hasn't been updated in 10 years and it's time for an update."

Henceroth highlighted the economic impacts of wintertime lane closures, citing numbers released by the Colorado Department of Transportation: Each hour that the interstate is closed during a winter weekend results in an economic loss of \$800,000. Last winter season, semi-truck spinouts caused the interstate to be closed 116 times for a total of 119 hours.

Last ski season, Colorado hosted 12.5 million skier visits, 7.6 million of which occurred at ski areas within two hours from Denver. Five million of those skiers and riders live in Colorado, Henceroth said.

"We wish we knew how many times these folks didn't ski because they were caught in a road closure or turned around and didn't ski again because they were scared they would get caught in another road closure," Henceroth said.

Dr. Flo Raitano, a 25-year Dillon resident, director of the I-70 Coalition and chairperson of the local hospital board of trustees, spoke of the medical need to keep the interstate open as much as possible to transport critical patients from the High Country to a Level 1 trauma center in Denver.

When the weather's bad, the Flight For Life helicopter is often grounded, and that's also when spinouts and lane closures typically occur on Interstate 70, which can stall an ambulance trying to get to the Front Range, Raitano said.

"It's more of a life and death (situation) and we're very sensitive — and we're delighted that a compromise has

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been struck,” Raitano said.

Raitano referred to a compromise between the Colorado Motor Carriers Association and the Teamsters, both of whom opposed the bill in its original form, and the bill’s sponsors.

Through the course of about four meetings between representatives from both sides of the issue, some give-and-take allowed the bill to take its current form. The idea of adding points to commercial driver’s licenses has been dropped, the fines are steeper than originally proposed, and an amendment was added that would allow vendors to sell or rent chains on the corridor for unprepared drivers.

Also in that time, CDOT earmarked \$2.475 million to address some of the truckers’ concerns, such as lack of well-lit chain-up areas on the I-70 corridor that are protected from passing traffic.

This summer, CDOT will add 100 new parking spaces for truckers traveling west, install better lighting in chain-up areas, and add new signs with flashing lights that warn other drivers of upcoming chain-up areas and reduce speeds, according to CDOT Region 1 director Jeff Kullman.

Even though the bill now has support from groups who once opposed it, several people acknowledged at Thursday’s hearing that there is still work to be done.

“I think it’s important to note that we’re not stopping with this bill,” said I-70 Coalition chairman and Town of Frisco manager Michael Penny. “We want to continue and move forward with a lot of other incremental steps to improve this corridor.”

Specifically, in the area of enforcement.

CDOT contracts with the Vail, Frisco and Silverthorne police departments and the Summit and Clear Creek county sheriff’s offices to help the understaffed Colorado State Patrol with chain law enforcement. Still, Rep. Dan Gibbs has written a letter to Gov. Bill Ritter asking for more state troopers to be assigned to the I-70 corridor.

“Without adequate state troopers patrolling our mountain highways, truck drivers who disobey our laws are not being stopped and ticketed,” Gibbs said in the March 19 letter.

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