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Teton Pass closed indefinitely; Gordon declares emergency

By Jasmine Hall Jackson Hole News&Guide Via Wyoming News Exchange
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A stretch of Teton Pass roadway connecting Jackson and Idaho fell apart due to a mudslide over the weekend. The mountain thoroughfare is expected to remain closed for the foreseeable future.

Courtesy Photo/ WYDOT

JACKSON — There's no timeline yet for how long Teton Pass will remain closed after a weekend landslide left a gaping hole in the highway linking the communities and economies of Idaho and Wyoming.

But Wyoming Department of Transportation crews have pinpointed the area where the ground had been shifting under the highway, and that "acceleration of movement" has stopped, WYDOT spokesperson Stephanie Harsha said Sunday.

The landslide isn't the only threat to the corridor, which shuttles goods and people across the state line and a winding mountain pass. A mudslide also continues to menace the highway at mile marker 15 near the weigh station.

"We're working as fast as we can," Harsha said.

WYDOT is evaluating viable interim fixes and starting to plan a more permanent solution.

Teton County Commission Chair Luther Propst worked with state officials through the weekend. Propst wants to figure out how to help "ease the pain that this thing is creating." There have been conversations about putting short-term housing or camping on the Teton County Fairgrounds and at the Virginian RV Park. Jackson Hole Mountain Resort President Mary Kate Buckley will speak today about the Ranch Lot in Teton Village.

"I've heard from people about standing up a housing exchange," Propst said. "People that have an empty guest room or guest house will let people use it. So, we're going to be brainstorming tomorrow, as well as talking about setting up some camping options."

Signs of trouble started Thursday when a motorcyclist hit a pavement crack at milepost 12.8 and crashed into a guardrail, triggering a temporary closure as crews patched the problem. Then WYDOT closed the highway again before dawn Friday due to a mudslide on the road farther down the mountain.

As heavy equipment mopped up mud and debris, crews higher up the mountain worked through the night Friday to remove the guardrail and pavement at the crack to relieve pressure on the sliding soils and to build a detour around the damage.

WYDOT crews and contractors from Evans Construction were on-site when the ground gave way and “catastrophically failed.” No one was injured and no equipment was damaged, WYDOT reported.

Crews then spent the better part of Saturday evaluating the stability and safety of the 30-yard section.

Gov. Mark Gordon declared an emergency, tapping into resources from the Federal Highway Administration.

“I recognize the significant impacts this closure has to Teton County residents, regional commuters and the local economy,” Gordon said.

Since 1969, when the modern highway over Teton Pass was completed, the roadway has been a main artery for commuters and commerce on the east and west side of the 2,000-foot mountain pass.

Residents of Victor and Driggs, Idaho — teachers, nurses, servers, construction workers, ski resort employees, forest rangers and more — are as much a part of the Jackson Hole community as they are a part of Teton Valley.

As the cost of living in Jackson Hole has skyrocketed, Jacksonites have flocked to Idaho, where living is cheaper. But Teton Valley has long been connected to Jackson Hole, economically and otherwise. Idaho and Wyoming residents routinely work, co-parent, visit family, seek health care and recreate across the pass.

The indefinite closure makes an already hour-long commute worse. For those who don't work remotely, the 45-minute commute on a good day without traffic or inclement weather, will now take almost two hours.

Commuters and travelers are directed to use the Snake River Canyon as a way around Teton Pass. No major construction is planned for that stretch of road this summer, only patch work in certain areas of the canyon.

“I’m not worried about the traffic in Hoback,” Rep. Andrew Byron, R-Hoback, said. “Because of a natural disaster, I welcome it. I hope we can solve the whole community’s problems as quickly as possible.”

Harsha said there may be internal conversations about opening up portions of Teton Pass Road. There are barriers on both sides of the pass.

“We only have barriers and gates at certain locations, so it takes more time and effort for us to limit that area,” she said of closing the pass at the top instead of the base. “We would have to take more traffic control devices up there. Whereas now, we have those gates in place.”

A couple of the closure gates have already been hit since the pass closed, and WYDOT is asking the public to stay out of the closed area for now.

She added that it is hard to track who’s coming in and out.

“We want to keep everybody as safe as possible,” Harsha said.

Spring runoff remains a concern.

“Our crews and our geologists are up in that area making sure we’re not going to see any kind of activity on another portion of the roadway,” she said.

Harsha said WYDOT is “begging the public for patience.”

Propst said the road isn’t in the purview of the town, but there will be a joint effort to address the community impact.

“I am grateful no one was injured thanks to monitoring and closures from WYDOT,” Jackson Mayor Hailey Morton Levinson said. “Our community has a great track record of coming together in times of need, working with all the different agencies, and getting information out to locals and visitors. Jackson is open and will do what we must to ease the impact on our communities.”