

January 29, 2008

January snow storm tests drivers' patience, WSDOT crews fight tough battle to keep roads clear

Cascades snow storm could keep I-90 closed until Wednesday.

The late January storm continues to slam the Cascades and eastern Washington this afternoon. The hardest hit areas are still the central Cascades across Snoqualmie Pass and the Spokane area.

“Our avalanche crews are working non-stop at the pass, but if it keeps snowing like this, we may not be able to get I-90 open across Snoqualmie Pass until Wednesday morning,” said Chris Christopher, WSDOT State Maintenance Engineer.

Eastern Washington is battling its own problems with blowing snow, high winds and road closures.

The Cascades Passes

Interstate 90 closed Tuesday morning at 7:35 a.m. when a snow slide fell across the eastbound lanes east of the summit. After nearly two feet in 24 hours and more snow predicted, avalanche experts closed I-90 between North Bend and Ellensburg. WSDOT and Washington State Patrol troopers escorted vehicles off the 70-mile stretch of road to safety and barred any further traffic.

Avalanche crews have been traversing an eight-mile stretch of I-90 east and west and back east again clearing avalanche chutes. WSDOT has brought additional crews from as far away as Bellevue and Yakima to help clear snow slides. Thirty-five snow blowers, graders and plows have been working all day.

“As soon as we get to one end, we have to go back and do it all over again. It’s just a tremendous amount of snow,” said Todd Trepanier, WSDOT Maintenance Engineer.

“While we’d like to give you an estimate of when the road will open, we simply can’t say because the snow is not letting up,” said Christopher. “We are watching the forecast and will know more later this evening”

“We know this is tough for those trying to get across the mountains,” Christopher said. “Our priority is the safety of travelers. We will not reopen Snoqualmie Pass until it is safe,” said Christopher.

At this time, drivers should be prepared for winter conditions, including compact snow and ice on all mountain pass highways. US 2 (Stevens Pass) and US 12 (White Pass) are open with traction tires required for all vehicles. Trucks over 10,000 GVW must use chains. Both US 2 and US 12 have seen additional traffic today.

The North Cascades Highway (SR 20) has extended its westside closure to the area just east of Newhalem due to snow slides as well. It may be Wednesday or later before that 13-mile stretch of road is open a gain between Newhalem and Diablo.

WSDOT recommends drivers continue to check the mountain pass Web page and stay tuned to local TV and radio news reports for the very latest. www.wsdot.wa.gov/traffic/passes

Eastern Washington

State Route 23 between Interstate 90 and the town of Harrington in Lincoln County is closed due to drifting snow. State Route 272 between Colfax and the Town of Palouse is closed as well. There is no estimate on when it will reopen.

All other routes are open, however there is blowing and drifting snow with compact snow and ice on all state highways to the south and west of Spokane including US 2, SR 23, SR 27, US 195, and SR 231. Highways north of Spokane are mostly compact snow and ice.

WSDOT crews are out in full force 24 hours a day, fighting through severe weather including record snowfall, extremely low temperatures and high winds. Forecasts indicate wind and snow will continue throughout much of Eastern Washington into Thursday.

Puget Sound

Puget Sound has largely escaped this round of storms. The next storm moves in Wednesday evening with a mixture of rain and snow.

Vancouver

Vancouver and most of Southwest Washington also experienced very little in way of snow or ice, with only higher elevations getting a light dusting. I-5 and I-205 remain bare and wet, and there are no projections for significant snow fall or ice in the coming days.

Mount St. Helens

SR 504, the Spirit Lake Highway closed on Tuesday afternoon due to significant snowfall at mile post 34 (Bear Creek Canyon). SR 504 routinely closes at this juncture when the snowfall is too heavy to maintain the roadway. 18 inches of new snow fell on SR 504 in the last 24 hours, and crews have no place to plow the snow without significantly narrowing the road. The closure will remain until at least tomorrow.