

Land, Water and People

Road Closures and Angry People

By Ronnie Day

Many public lands visitors, especially local folks, call our offices this time of year and ask us what is going on with their favorite road. Sometimes the questioner is angry and will accuse us of closing their favorite road for no rhyme or reason.

“Spring fever,” which follows on the heels of “cabin fever,” probably plays a role in the anger extended towards us. During the long, dark winter months of December, January, and February, people have stayed inside the cabin doing things like watching the NFL, American Idol, and Dancing with the Stars. When the days start getting longer and warmer, folks want to get in their SUV and visit the great outdoors. I know this because it happens to me too.

Unfortunately, what the public confronts in the spring, as they turn off the blacktop to access their favorite road, is either a snow berm (hump of hard, plowed snow) or a closed gate with a large “ROAD CLOSED” sign on it and a lock in place.

The roads with snow berms are managed as public snowmobile routes under Special Use Permits from January into March. Three local winter sports clubs based in South Fork and Creede groom close to 250 miles of roads with funds they get through State off-highway vehicle grants. They put great effort into grooming, marking, and signing these areas for winter recreation use. Vehicles that cross the berms and drive up the groomed roads often break through the crust and get hopelessly stuck, destroying the groomed trail. So, if you see a snow berm and some signs prohibiting wheeled vehicles, please respect it and refrain from driving on that road.

The roads with closed gates in late March or April usually are only temporarily closed. This is an inconvenience to the public looking to get out and shake their spring/cabin fever condition, but there is good reason to close the roads. The roadbeds in the spring become soft and vulnerable. As snow melts into the roadbed, it becomes a supersaturated deep layer of mud. By swinging the gates shut for awhile, we prevent deep tire ruts and potholes in the road surface, keep the gravel in place, and the culverts draining the melt waters. Closing the road also protects the visitor from getting hopelessly stuck.

Another consideration is that funds (your tax dollars) dedicated to smoothing rutted roads, replacing plugged culverts, cleaning road ditches, and spreading gravel have been slowly decreasing for many years. The SLV Public Lands Center, along with the help of the counties, only has enough resources to maintain the roads once or maybe twice a year. By protecting the roads during mud season, the scheduled maintenance can do the best job possible and stretch the dollars.

As a public agency, we do not like to keep the public from using “their” lands, but we hope the public understands the purpose of temporary road closures is to protect the resource and stretch the budget.

Please contact your local SLV Public Lands Center office for specific road conditions at any time.

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