

McKenzie Pass Highway opens for non-motorized traffic on May 19

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Road improvement project will close highway for approximately 60 days starting June 15

MCKENZIE BRIDGE, Oregon -- The McKenzie Pass Highway (OR 242) will officially open to pedestrian and bicycle traffic on Saturday morning, May 19. The highway closed for the winter on November 7, 2006. Last year, the highway opened to bicycle and pedestrian traffic on June 2, and to motorized vehicle traffic on June 29. An ODOT snow blower has spent the past week clearing one lane of the highway, which will not open for vehicle traffic until all snow is melted off the roadway. The snow gate at Alder Springs (mile point 65.9) will remain shut. ODOT urges those who access the highway from the west side to seize the opportunity to ride or walk the scenic route over the next four weeks. Beginning on or around June 15, Willamette National Forest officials will begin a road improvement project at Dead Horse Grade (about mile point 69). The project, funded by the Federal Highway Administration, will cut back the slope and realign the highway, making the road more stable and safe for all users. The project, at the first of three major switchback curves if approaching from the west, will last for eight weeks. During the work period, the highway will be closed to all traffic from Alder Springs on the west side to the Obsidian Trailhead (mile point 70.85) on the east side. U.S. Forest Service officials anticipate completing the project no later than Aug. 15. During the June 15-Aug. 15 construction period, the Forest Service road (Road 4200260) accessing Scott Lake Campground will also be closed. The highway will remain open from the east gate near Sisters to just west of the Obsidian Trailhead, allowing visitors approaching from the east to hike the Obsidian Trail and visit the Dee Wright Observatory. This year, the first 11 miles on the west side of the highway, from Highway 126 to the closure point at Alder Springs, opened to vehicle traffic on May 3. Motorists driving from the east on this curvy road need to be aware of bicyclists and pedestrians on the roadway and take proper precautions. Vehicles longer than 35 feet are prohibited from using the highway. The longest closure period occurred during the winter of 1998-1999, when the highway was closed for 256 days and did not open until July 29. The shortest closure period occurred during the winter of 1933-1934, when the highway was closed for 96 days. The first route over the McKenzie Pass, known as Craig's McKenzie Salt Springs/Deschutes Wagon Road, was completed in 1872. This toll road connected the Willamette Valley with Camp Polk, near what is now Sisters. The charge was \$2 for a wagon drawn by two horses, \$2.50 for a wagon with four horses, \$1 for a man on a horse and 10 cents each for loose cattle and horses. Modern construction techniques allowed crews to rebuild the road in the 1920s. At that time, the McKenzie Pass Highway was built and the former wagon route was abandoned, except in places where the new highway followed the same path. In 1936 the Clear Lake-Belknap Springs section of OR 126 was completed, giving motorists a new, straighter, year-round alternative for travel between the Willamette Valley and Central Oregon. The McKenzie Pass Highway became a seasonal scenic highway in 1962 with the completion of the Clear Lake-Belknap Springs section of OR 126. Even during its tenure as the main route between the southern Willamette Valley and Central Oregon, the narrow, twisting roadway and high elevation (5,325 feet) made the highway too difficult to maintain and keep clear during the winter months.

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