

Caltrans closes last dirt highway in state system



David Bauman/The Press-Enterprise

Caltrans workers install a concrete barrier on Highway 173 several hundred yards after the pavement ends near Lake Arrowhead on Thursday.

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The end of the road has come for Highway 173, where the pavement ends northwest of Lake Arrowhead.

Caltrans is closing the road -- the last dirt road in the state highway system -- to cut maintenance costs and eliminate an unsafe road in the remote San Bernardino Mountains.

Residents are lamenting the loss of the unpaved portion of the highway, a 29-mile link between Highway 18 near Skyforest on the southern slope to the Silverwood Lake area northwest of the mountains. Locals say the route remains a vital connection to the High Desert, especially if disaster strikes the mountains.

Crews began placing concrete barriers across the dirt road on Thursday, shutting off the road from Wilson Creek Road west of Lake Arrowhead to Arrowhead Lake Road, east of Hesperia.

Just beyond "pavement ends" warning signs, riddled with bullet holes from recreational gun shooting, the paved road stops about seven miles northwest of Lake Arrowhead.

Drivers can no longer make their way past where pine trees thin out on the hillsides, up and over the northern peaks of the mountains, where a High Desert landscape of windblown rocks and sagebrush reach its highest point. Instead, they must take the 34-mile trip around, using Highway 18 and Highway 138.

Officials said the longer trip is a better choice.

"The general public should not be on it," Caltrans spokeswoman Terri Kasinga said of the unpaved section of the 173.

Safety concerns dominated the decision that it was better to close the road, said Ray Wolfe, Caltrans district director for San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

"Somebody is going to sue all the rest of us in this room," Wolfe told attendees of a public meeting in Crestline last month.

Highway officials made the decision last year to close a five-mile section of the road, after concluding it was too troublesome to keep open and too costly when maintenance budgets are stretched thin.

Devoting heavy equipment -- at least two bulldozers -- and a maintenance crew to smooth and clear it two or three times a year for two weeks at a time was too expensive, said Richard Almanzan, maintenance superintendent for Caltrans in the San Bernardino Mountains.

Emergency vehicles, the U.S. Forest Service and San Bernardino Flood Control District will have keys to locks that will be placed on a gate permanently closing the road, so some maintenance might be needed to keep it accessible for the agencies, Almanzan said.

An average of 50 drivers used the road westbound daily in 2009, according to Caltrans estimates. About 30 people headed into the mountains from Hesperia each day.

"The road gets used more than you think it does," said Duane Banner, 74, a 47-year resident of the area. "People up here know what it is, and they use it."

Residents interested in some off-road fun or looking for a secluded spot to practice firing a gun are frequent visitors.

Banner said he understands the road is a pain to maintain, and that it probably has been since it was first carved into the mountains in the late 1800s as a logging route. He also agreed that some drivers and vehicles aren't equipped to handle it.

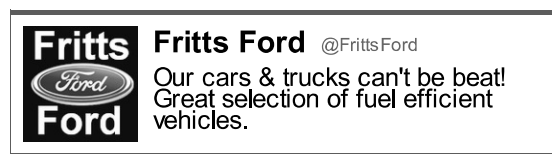
But some will miss using it, he said.

"The road is safer now than ever," he said, noting work in the past four years has smoothed it and improved the three-foot dirt berms that line the highway on the slope side. "We need this road to get around the mountain."

In an emergency, such as a major wildfire, mountain residents said the road can be invaluable. Though the road can be impassable at times, mountain residents said they know when they can access it safely.

"It's our road, and it works," Banner told Kasinga at the site on Thursday. "You're taking it away, and that's wrong."

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