

Extreme weather forces record road closure

Dozens of avalanches at Kicking Horse Canyon send truckers on lengthy, costly detours

By Kim Pemberton And Chad Skelton, Vancouver Sun January 18, 2011

Truckers transporting cargo east on the Trans-Canada Highway are being forced to make longer and costlier trips to get around a highway closure.

The highway at Kicking Horse Canyon closed Friday because of extreme weather and avalanche conditions and isn't expected to reopen until Wednesday -- the longest closure of the highway in more than 25 years.

"I can't remember it being this bad in all the time I've been in trucking," said Jay Richardson, a 30-year veteran and dispatcher with Butterworth's Transport. "When I drove we used to get stuck in Golden sometimes but not to this extent."

Richardson said the company has about 25 trucks travelling from Vancouver to Calgary and Edmonton, bringing in general freight and produce containers -- most of it from California.

He said drivers already out on the road can opt to wait until the highway reopens and only one driver so far has chosen to stay in Golden.

The others are taking alternative routes, either Highway 3, which adds about 805 extra kilometres onto the trip or travelling the Yellowhead highway to Edmonton and then dropping back to Calgary for an additional 1,127 km.

A third option is Highway 95, but Richardson said it's not as reliable.

"It [Highway 95] opens for a while then shuts down again. It's longer, slow-going, windier. It definitely takes longer."

"We have observed in excess of 35 very large avalanches in the Kicking Horse canyon over the last few days," Mike Boissoneault, manager of the transportation ministry's avalanche and weather program, said at a news conference held Monday.

Boissoneault said the unusually dangerous conditions in the Kicking Horse are due to about a metre of wet, heavy snow falling on top of what was already a very heavy snowpack.

"Nobody likes a road closure, but when natural avalanches are running to the frequency and size we've seen over the last few days, we have no choice but to close the highway for everyone's safety."

And the Kicking Horse isn't the only area of the province closed to drivers.

The Trans-Canada is also closed between Revelstoke and Glacier National Park, which the ministry hoped to reopen late Monday, and between Yoho National Park and Lake Louise, which won't reopen until Wednesday.

Avalanche dangers have also shut down Highway 31A between Kaslo and New Denver and Highway 97 in the Pine Pass area. Both were due to reopen sometime Monday afternoon.

Boissoneault said ministry crews are setting off numerous explosives throughout the avalanche danger zones to help reduce the risk, including making use of a new canister device -- known as a "Daisy Bell" -- which is suspended by helicopter above the snowpack and detonated.

Despite multiple road and highway closures throughout the province, ministry officials said most communities still have alternate routes to get to their destination.

The ministry said the only community completely cut off at the moment is Field, located between Golden and Banff.

"That is the one community where there's no access in or out," said Boissoneault.

"It's a mountain community. ... People that live there are fairly independent and resilient and I'm sure they're taking this all in stride."

BC Trucking Association CEO and president Paul Landry said while the closures are disruptive for the industry there's nothing they can do, unless there is a concern the ministry was not allocating sufficient resources to reopen the roads. This isn't the case, he added.

"Most trucking companies live with the reality of mountain winter conditions and rock slides.

"Most have a handle on how to deal with those situations," said Landry, adding the ministry is doing a good job of keeping drivers up to date with road and weather conditions in the area.

Ministry officials suggested drivers go to drivebc.cato to get the latest information on closures and road conditions.

Meanwhile, the Nelson Search and Rescue team resumed their efforts Monday to recover the body of the male skier who died Sunday after an avalanche in Kokanee Glacier Provincial Park.

His name has not yet been released.

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Vancouver Sun