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Slides block popular Yellowstone entrance

Summer closure likely; snowmelt and earlier heavy rain blamed



Montana Transportation Dept.

One of 13 sections of Montana's Beartooth Highway hit by landslides is seen shortly after the slides in late May.

The Associated Press

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RED LODGE, Mont. - A series of huge landslides has blocked the scenic Beartooth Highway, a major tourist magnet that winds through a high mountain pass into Yellowstone National Park, likely closing it all summer.

Construction crews plowed a path around the lowest mud and rock slide south of Red Lodge on Tuesday and prepared to attack the next slide in the series, but that work only serves to clear a route for contractors who will have to make millions of dollars in repairs.

Tuesday was the second day of moving the highly unstable debris by crews from JTL Group crews. "We know it's going to slide. We'll try and control it," said company representative Jay Steinmasel.

The late journalist Charles Kuralt called the Beartooth "the most beautiful roadway in America."

The mountainside highway is closed part of the year by snow and typically opens during the Memorial Day weekend. But on May 19-20 the slides and washouts damaged or destroyed 13 segments of a 12-mile stretch. No one was injured.



Montana Transportation Dept.
Several of the landslides can be seen cutting through part of the winding highway.

State officials estimated more than 500 million tons of debris cascaded down the mountainsides. The slides were blamed on snowmelt and heavy rain, and water is still flowing across the highway in spots.

The route between Red Lodge and Yellowstone National Park, via Cooke City, is expected to remain closed through mid-October.

State Department of Transportation officials said they hope to award a bid for rebuilding the damaged portions of the highway this month.

The highway winds over 10,940-foot Beartooth Pass, eventually reaching Yellowstone's northeast entrance. The Wyoming side of the road remains open to traffic and the park's northeast entrance is still open.

The closure is a major concern for Red Lodge, which depends on business from tourists who use the highway. Officials have touted as an alternative the longer Chief Joseph Scenic Highway, saying that drive time to Yellowstone is similar to that of the Beartooth Highway.

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