

Commission of Emergency Management prepares emergency declaration



Arizona State Police and Arizona Department of Transportation discuss the damaged roadway on U.S. 89, approximately 25 miles south of Page. Navajo residents in the area are affected by the road closure and have to travel alternative roads for school and emergency services. NDOT crews are working with the BIA and Coconino County to maintain alternate routes in the area. (Photo by Leonard Williams)

The Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management (CEM) convened at the Navajo Transportation Complex on Feb. 22 to discuss the collapsed roadway on U.S. 89, approximately 25 miles south of Page.

The roadway collapse was likely the result of a geologic slump on Feb. 20, at 5:09 a.m.

Taft Blackhorse, manager of the Navajo Division of Transportation Department of Project Management, said the road damage was the result of a slump. His educational background in geology led to this conclusion, he said.

"I don't think it was a small earthquake or tremor. It appears to have been loose soil that eventually eroded, commonly known as a slump," Blackhorse said.

According to the U.S. Geologic Survey, a slump occurs on hillsides that have a thick cover of loose, rocky debris, commonly taking place after heavy rains saturate the ground.

Regardless of the cause, several Navajo chapters have been affected by the road closure and the commission cited concerns ranging from the transport of school kids and emergency medical service response.

NDOT director Paulson Chaco is working with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Coconino County to ensure maintenance of alternate dirt roads for the influx of travelers in the area.

"We have NDOT crews working with the BIA to complete blading activities and to assist with setting up electronic message boards to alert motorists of the road closure," he said.

U.S. 89 is closed from mile post 544.50 to mile post 524.

The Arizona Department of Transportation has detoured traffic at U.S. 89A to State Road 98 and on to U.S. 160 for motorists traveling to and from Page.

Commission chairman Herman Shorty said the primary concern of the CEM is assistance for Navajo communities affected by the closure.

"We are asking for consideration that a state of emergency be declared," Shorty said.

The commission drafted an emergency declaration and is awaiting signature approval from Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly.

Navajo Nation Department of Emergency Management director Rose Whitehair said NDOT and the BIA Department of Roads have placed signage indicating "No Thru Traffic" and "No Trucks" for entrances on N20 and other dirt roads near U.S. 89.

A semi tractor trailer truck is stuck on N20 from an attempt to detour around the closed road.

NDOT principal civil engineer Darryl Bradley said N20 and other dirt roads in the area are not conducive to heavy truck traffic because of sandy conditions and patches of rough road.

"ADOT conducted a feasibility study to use N20 as a new alignment for a state road that would basically remove U.S. 89 off of their inventory," Bradley said. "I guess it was cost prohibitive, so it never went any further than that."

Presently, NDOT and the BIA are looking at paving N20, the 28 mile stretch of dirt road from LeChee to Gap, which is estimated to cost at least \$50 million. Plans are to tackle this task in phases.

Leonard Williams, a Navajo Police officer with the Tuba City District said ADOT is maintaining traffic control near the damaged roadway.

"ADOT has closed off traffic on the north and south ends," Williams said. "They estimated the road will be closed for at least two months before it's repaired."

He shared photos of the damaged road with the commission and noted ADOT has declined assistance from Navajo Nation law enforcement.

Despite this, Navajo Police are keeping a presence in the area.

NDOT and the BIA are working with Coconino County to maintain nearby BIA and county roads in anticipation of increased traffic.

The BIA has completed blading activities on N6210, 6211 and N201.

Coconino County is maintaining N21, which stretches 28 miles from Kaibeto to Gap. Currently, 4.5 miles of this road is under construction from Tonalea to Kaibeto.

NDOT road crews are on standby in the western agency for possible assistance with roads in the area. They are also erecting signs in the area.

Information: www.navajodot.org