

U.S. Route 491 closed due to road damage from heavy rain



On July 5, 2013, heavy rains damaged the roadway on U.S. Route 491 between Naschitti and Sheep Springs. Motorists are advised to take alternate detour routes on U.S. Highway 371 to reach the Four Corners, or Navajo Route 12 to reach Window Rock. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

NASCHITTI, N.M.-U.S. Route 491 is closed to traffic both directions between Sheep Springs and Naschitti, near milepost 44, after heavy rains collapsed a portion of the roadway on night of July 5, 2013.

New Mexico Department of Transportation crews are onsite developing detours and scoping a permanent solution.

Jeremiah Herrera is the NMDOT supervisor on the scene.

Herrera said three channels of water undermined a 24-foot-by-15-foot rise culvert. The rushing water bent the western side of the culvert up and caused the roadway to drop approximately 2.5-feet.

NMDOT has a detour

route in place for emergency vehicles and detour route for essential traffic could be completed as early as July 10. Crewmembers are currently installing pipe and grading the area.

In the interim, all other motorists are advised to travel the detour route on U.S. 371 for transportation in the Four Corners area.

For travelers headed to Window Rock, another route is available on Navajo Route 12 in Sheep Springs.

Navajo Division of Transportation Director Paulson Chaco met with NMDOT officials July 6 to assess the damage.

"I met with Larry Maynard,

District 6 engineer, to offer our assistance from the Navajo Nation but he said New Mexico DOT crews had the situation under control, Chaco said.

Navajo DOT was contacted Friday night regarding the road collapse.

In an email to Chaco, Maynard stated, "Permanent structure should be designed and constructed within four weeks, plus a week for roadway features."

The road collapse occurred on the old two-lane road segment of U.S. Route 491, south of Sheep Springs.

Navajo DOT and Senator John Pinto (D-Dist. 3) have been lobbying federal and state officials for the completion of

the four-lane construction of U.S. Route 491, citing several safety considerations, including dilapidated infrastructure.

Four-lane construction remains to be completed from Sheep Springs, south to Twin Lakes, a distance of 26.1 miles and a cost of \$102.9 million.

On the evening of July 6, the Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management convened at the Navajo Transportation Complex in Tse Bonito regarding the road closure.

The closure of U.S. Route 491 in the Eastern Navajo Agency occurred more than four months after a dry slide closed U.S. 89 in the Western Navajo Agency.

The importance of restoring traffic through this main artery of the Four Corners was not lost on the commission, which drafted an emergency declaration.

CEM-13-07-06 was passed by a vote of 3-0. Commissioner Benjamin Bennett made the motion to approve the declaration and was seconded by Commissioner Eugenia Quintana.

Chairman Herman Shorty signed the declaration and sent it to Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly for his concurrence.

The declaration states, “The Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management hereby declares a State of Emergency for the Navajo Nation along U.S. Highway 491 due to a culvert washout from torrential thunderstorms posing a substantial public safety risk to travelers traversing the route and thereby severing, interfering and disrupting public transportation, emergency transport, normal and commercial traffic to the traveling public.”

The declaration begins the process for appropriate Navajo Nation entities to immediately begin coordination with all relevant agencies for the use of resources to meet the accessibility needs of the traveling public.

This includes activation of available emergency resources such as funding to cover personnel, equipment, and other means as determined fit and feasible to restore and sustain vital community infrastructure.

Information:
www.navajodot.org



Three channels of water traveling from the Chuska Mountains undermined a culvert and caused a portion of U.S. Route 491 to collapse. NDOT crews are working on a detour route. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Left, crewmembers install pipes for the detour route to restore essential traffic. Middle, the damaged culvert is visible as a forklift delivers a new pipe. Right, the roadway collapsed 2.5 feet from rushing water. (Photos by Rick Abasta)



This wide angle view provides an extensive look at the damage caused on U.S. Route 491 between Naschitti and Sheep Springs on July 5. (Photo by Rick Abasta)