

Navajo DOT meets with federal, state officials regarding U.S. 89 road closure



Navajo Division of Transportation Director Paulson Chaco shares concerns on Navajo Route 20 with Robert Samour, deputy state engineer for the Arizona Department of Transportation. NDOT met with officials from ADOT, BIA, Coconino County and the FHWA on Feb. 27 regarding the U.S. 89 road closure in Flagstaff. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

Officials from the Navajo Division of Transportation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Federal Highway Administration, Arizona Department of Transportation, and Coconino County convened on Feb. 27 at the ADOT Flagstaff District office to discuss ramifications of the road closure on U.S. 89.

A contingent of 40 people discussed ADOT's on-going assessment of the rock slide that caused pavement settlement, including proposed detours and partnerships to restore essential traffic.

Robert Samour, senior deputy state engineer for ADOT, facilitated the meeting and began with a slideshow that illustrated the extent of the damage.

He said the objective of the meeting was to provide an

update on the slide that occurred on U.S. 89, to hear the various agency challenges with regard to the detour, and to find alternate routes to carry traffic, specifically Navajo Route 20.

"ADOT is doing everything it can, first and foremost, to ensure the safety of the public, to make sure that we're being as responsive as we can, and to get that road reopened as quickly as possible," Samour said.

The rockslide happened on Feb. 20, around 5 a.m., resulting in two vehicle accidents on the damaged roadway of U.S. 89.

Two waves of pavement settlement occurred, according to ADOT field reports. The initial wave buckled the pavement and resulted in a five-foot pavement surface to pavement surface settlement.

Samour said the soil is shift-

ing down the mountain both west and east. Large cracks in the surface of the earth are visible, extending through the guard rail and chasing the slope down into the valley, he added.

"You can envision this failure as almost in the shape of a frown," he said. "It's about a semi-circle down to the base of the hill and it actually widens out to about 1,200 feet."

ADOT survey crews are gathering geotechnical data and mapping the area. They are also installing inclinometers to measure slope movement and stability.

A national landslide expert was also brought in to assist with the assessment.

"Our geotechnical team still feels the area is unstable," Samour said.

He noted that the site has

some surface cracks 30-feet deep and that ADOT has increased security measures for this reason, including a chain link fence, and pedestrian signage warning of the danger.

Upon completion of the surveys and installation of inclinometers, the plan is to use an auger to drill into the earth and gather soil samples. Geotechnical data gathering is estimated to take two weeks, after which ADOT will have a clearer picture and timeframe for repairs.

In the meantime, ADOT has incorporated the National Incident Management System approach and established a web emergency operations center.

The website can be accessed at: www.azdot.gov/us89/.

Audra Merrick, ADOT district engineer for Flagstaff, has been designated the incident

commander. Liaisons have also been established for operations, finance and public information.

Roland Becenti, acting division manager for BIA Navajo Region Division of Transportation, asked for worst case and best case scenarios.

Samour said, "The worst case scenario is that the area is deemed so unstable that we can't fix it. So, one option would be, do we look at another alignment?"

Other options included re-aligning the road to the backside of the rock outcropping, or bridging the area, both of which are dependent upon the support

concerned about the situation.

"The signs were up on Sunday, but yesterday at 9 a.m., there was already a semi truck that was stuck on N20 again. It's very sandy, that's the reason why we can't have trucks on there," Fowler said.

Other safety concerns include the open range status of the road, leaving travelers susceptible to hitting livestock, especially at night. Speed is another factor.

Three rollover accidents were reported last week, from motorists traveling at 75 miles-per-hour on the dirt road of N20. She stressed that U.S. 89A is



Robert Samour of the Arizona Department of Transportation holds the 2005 feasibility study that was conducted on Navajo Route 20. ADOT compiled the assessment to determine whether N20 was feasible for traffic. Since the road closure of U.S. 89 on Feb. 20, the study has been dusted off and reopened for review. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

“ The worst case scenario is that the area is deemed so unstable that we can't fix it.”

of geotechnical data, he said.

The group expressed interest in utilizing N20 as a detour route to Page. Currently, traffic has been detoured east on U.S. 160 to State Road 98 north to Page.

Becenti said N20 is still under the BIA's jurisdiction and that Navajo Region Director Sharon Pinto verbally approved restriction and limitation of truck traffic on N20 due to road conditions.

Paulson Chaco, director of NDOT, said enforcement of N20 is in the jurisdiction of the Navajo Police.

"As far as enforcement of those trucks, I would have to rely on my counterparts, which is the Division of Public Safety to take on that responsibility," Chaco said. "The Navajo Nation President wants to limit truck traffic on N20 for safety purposes for our traveling public."

Although NDOT and BIA road crews erected signage stating "No Trucks" and "Local Traffic Only," semi trucks continue to attempt to travel through N20.

Coconino County Supervisor Lena Fowler is more than

still open, including businesses in the Marble Canyon area.

For self-employed Navajos living in the area, U.S. 89 was the lifeline to the community and its closure has damaged an already economically depressed area, she noted.

"The whole region is dependent on tourism," Fowler said.

The Navajo Nation, Coconino County, and State of Arizona have all emergency declarations in place regarding U.S. 89 and assistance from the FHWA is forthcoming.

Estimates by ADOT to pave the existing N20 roadway as a detour hover around \$10 to \$11 million. To pave the roadway for commercial traffic, that figure expands to \$14 to \$15 million.

Chaco said, "N20 is an option that we need to put on the table. The president issued his statement that he is willing to approve N20 as a major arterial, utilizing whatever funds are necessary to address that."

Information:
www.navajodot.org



Coconino County Supervisor Lena Fowler said the road closure on U.S. 89 has impacted Navajo communities financially, as many self-employed Navajos depend on the tourism for their financial well-being. She said ADOT and others must make a concentrated effort to let the public know U.S. 89A remains open, as does Marble Canyon and other points of interest. (Photo by Rick Abasta)