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

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.

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 shifting 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
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."