

## Emergency declared for Manuelito Canyon bridge closure

MANUELITO CANYON, N.M.-The Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management declared an emergency for the closure of the South Manuelito Bridge No. 8080.

The commission convened at the Navajo Transportation Complex on April 24 to discuss the bridge closure, which severed major arterial traffic to and from the Manuelito Chapter area.

Commissioner Ben Bennett said the bridge closure was the result of safety considerations for travelers in the area.

“People traveling that stretch of bridge aren’t safe, especially when there’s rainy weather,” Bennett said.

The pier supporting the bridge could fail, causing further sagging, reducing load capacity, or even possible collapse.

Erosion was a primary concern for the bridge, which was erected in the 1970s, according to McKinley County employees constructing an alternate access route.

The Bailey bridge in Manuelito Canyon is a portable, prefabricated truss bridge that was utilized extensively by the military during World War II.

The bridge is located 3.5 miles southeast of Navajo Route 7140.

There are two bridges in the area and bridge number two is the structure facing erosion and structural issues. The McKinley County Roads Department has constructed an emergency bypass route through the wash.

The earthen structure is susceptible to damage from rain, however, and efforts are underway to repair the damaged bridge.

Paulson Chaco, director for Navajo Division of Transportation, said he will be traveling to Santa Fe to meet with Tom Church, cabinet secretary for New Mexico Department of Transportation and John Don Martinez, division administrator for the Federal Highway Administration New Mexico Division.

“This is a major roadway for Navajo families in the Manuelito Canyon area,” Chaco said. “I will be meeting with officials in Santa Fe to discuss funding options for the repair of the bridge.”

On April 17, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and McKinley County Roads Dept conducted a safety assessment of the bridge and determined it to be structurally unsafe.

The assessment was conducted along with the Navajo Nation Department of Emergency Management, Manuelito Chapter and McKinley County Office of Emergency Management.

Approximately 45 families utilize the bridge, with an average of 4.5 people per home. The high traffic volume includes daily use by school buses, service providers and emergency responders.

The Manuelito Chapter declared on emergency on the bridge closure April 18 and the bridge was officially closed on April 19.

NMDOT is assessing the report from the state bridge engineer to calculate load rating and corrective action for the bridge.

For now, the 45 households that utilize the bridge are will continue traveling on the emergency bypass for access.

NNCEM unanimously passed the declaration by a vote of 5-0 and it was signed by Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly.



Top, a fish eye view of Manuelito Bridge No. 8080. Middle, McKinley County Roads Dept workers install a culvert for the temporary bypass route. Bottom, erosion near support beams are a concern. (Photos by Rick Abasta.)