

Some Columbia Gorge trailheads remain inaccessible

Columbia River Highway closure restricts access to popular hikes

By JAMIE HALE
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — Hikers looking forward to exploring the Columbia River Gorge this spring may notice a few roadblocks in the way of some of the area's most popular spots.

The Oregon Department of Transportation said that a closure of part of the Historic Columbia River Highway will remain in place indefinitely, as landslides continue to flood the scenic highway, blocking off access to recreation areas that otherwise remain open.

What's going on with the historic Columbia River Highway?

A road closure will remain in place between Bridal Veil and Ainsworth State Park this spring, ODOT said, blocking access to all vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians.

Don Hamilton, spokesman for ODOT, said there are a dozen active landslides along the historic highway, including 30 debris flows at one location west of Multnomah Falls. The slides have been bringing mud, water, rocks and debris onto the road, and have flowed continually all season, he said.

"It's not so much that these are huge amounts of debris, but just that they are happening on a regular basis," Hamilton said. "It's not the volume, it's the frequency."

He said the highway will reopen as soon as it's safe to do so, but noted there's no current timeline. State park and ODOT officials indicated that closures could last through much of the spring.



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Which areas are inaccessible?

The highway closure blocks access to the Wahkeena and Horsetail Falls trailheads on either side of Multnomah Falls, as well as the Oneonta Trailhead, which has been closed since December 2020 due to a landslide. Multnomah Falls itself is still accessible from the parking lot on Interstate 84.

The Ainsworth State Park campground, scheduled to open for the season on March 12, also remains inaccessible, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department said, along with nearby John B. Yeon State Park, which in January reopened to the

public for the first time since the 2017 Eagle Creek fire.

Additional slides have also blocked off portions of the Historic Columbia River Highway State Trail, a cycling and walking path that traces the original route of the scenic highway. The trail is closed between the Toothrock and Bridge of the Gods trailheads, state park officials said.

Which trails are still open, but harder to get to?

Many hiking trails that wind through the forested hills of the Columbia Gorge remain open, even those with trailheads that are inaccessible by car.

The Wahkeena Trail can be accessed from either direction by trails coming from Multnomah Falls and Angels Rest. John B. Yeon is accessible from the east by biking or walking along the Historic Columbia River Highway State Trail from the Toothrock Trailhead to the west.

However, those routes may add many more miles to your day. Hiking to Wahkeena Falls from the Angel's Rest Trailhead, for example, is an 11-mile round-trip hike, rather than a quick 0.4-mile walk from the Wahkeena Trailhead and back. Check trail maps and hiking guides before setting off on a detour.

Horsetail Falls and Ainsworth are not currently accessible by other trailheads.

Will this mean more crowds on other trails?

Nearby trailheads that remain open could see an influx of traffic as hikers descend upon the Columbia Gorge this spring, their options now limited by the highway closure.

Glenn Littrell, state park manager for the Columbia Gorge, said he's concerned about crowding if places like John B. Yeon and Ainsworth state parks remain inaccessible.

"When you take those access points out to the

public, their options get limited quick," Littrell said. "Then you throw an extra 40 or 50 people on a hike" like Angels Rest, which is notoriously crowded as it is.

The problem is compounded by other long-term closures in the area, including the enormously popular Eagle Creek Trail, which is now closed indefinitely, forest officials said, after landslides shut down the hiking trail only two weeks after it reopened for the first time in more than three years.

Why are the landslides so bad this year?

Landslides are not unusual in the Columbia Gorge, but this winter they've seemed to be a bigger problem than normal. ODOT officials said the particularly wet winter and damage from the Eagle Creek fire are to blame, as water has run down the barren slopes unabated.

On Jan. 13, a particularly large landslide killed one driver and temporarily shut down eastbound Interstate 84, but slides had already been plaguing the historic highway by then.

On Dec. 20, 2020, a landslide shut down the highway between Angel's Rest and Multnomah Falls. More landslides arrived two weeks later, shutting that section down once again. The snow, ice, rain and wind that pummeled the region over the winter only compounded the problem, officials said.

Now, crews are just waiting on the earth to finally settle before they can clean up the debris, stabilize the area and reopen it to the public. In the meantime, ODOT is telling drivers, cyclists and pedestrians to stay out of any closed areas.

"We're going to open it when it's safe to reopen it," Hamilton said. "And we don't know when that's going to be."

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