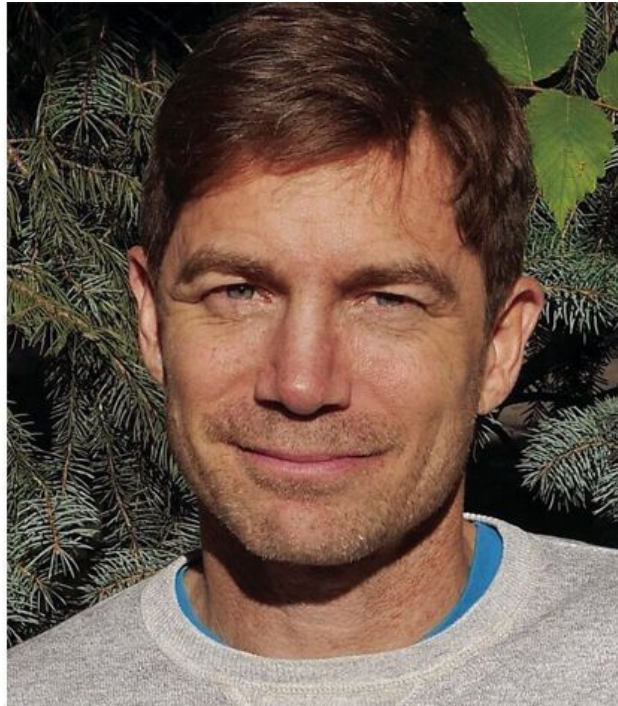


Writers on the Range: Rushing water closes a highway in Western Colorado

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The small towns of Paonia and Hotchkiss in western Colorado are seeing fewer tourists this spring. Exceptionally high runoff blew out a culvert on State Highway 133 about seven miles northeast of Paonia, which then allowed rushing water to carve a gully into the roadbed.

Back in August 2020, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) evaluated the culvert, found it vulnerable, and put it in a queue for repair, said CDOT spokesperson Elise Thatcher. But Region 3, encompassing northern Colorado, had 100 culverts needing work. The one near Paonia apparently landed too far down on the list.

In what might be termed an oversight, CDOT issued statements to the media labeling the washout a “sinkhole.” According to the United States Geological Survey, however, sinkholes have no entry or exit. They occur when subsurface material caves in, usually during a drought.

The rusty culvert on Highway 133 crumpled on April 29, allowing the usually meek Bear Creek to start excavating the roadway. CDOT was alerted and began monitoring the situation. Meanwhile, drivers

continued to use the road until the early morning of May 3, when high water pushed the culvert down the hillside. After that, a 10-foot-wide section of highway collapsed.

Over the next three weeks, high water gouged an ever-deeper streambed through the road.

Other road damage in the area was discovered May 24 when fast runoff washed out the seasonal Kebler Pass Road. The Forest Service said that a paved section near the resort town of Crested Butte was gone.

According to Gunnison County Sheriff Adam Murdie, “Kebler is a bigger washout than Bear Creek and took the whole road out.”

The good news is that Gunnison County Road and Bridge acted quickly to begin repairs, with June 9 as the expected date of completion, said Sheriff Murdie.

CDOT put the road-rebuilding job near Paonia out for an emergency bid in early May, and Ralph L. Wadsworth Construction, with an office in Frederick, Colorado, was awarded the contract May 16. That’s when the company began engineering work on what will be a temporary bridge, said CDOT’s Thatcher.

Physical construction began Tuesday, May 30, almost a full month after the roadway collapsed. Thatcher said work should be completed well before the end of June.

Judging from comments on social media, many local residents think the state moved far too slowly to fix and reopen the highway.

“They could have dropped in a new culvert and backfilled the roadway with gravel,” said Somerset Water Superintendent John Mlakar. As the Colorado Transportation Department will tell you, however, they have to proceed in a deliberate way.

Townsfolds are saying no one has seen road damage like this since the massive East Muddy Slide of 1986. The mile-wide slide was three-pronged and closed Highway 133 between Paonia and the town of Carbondale for four months.

Repairs progressed slowly as the landslides — which attracted geologists from all over the world — flowed downhill, initially at one foot per hour, then slowing before grinding to a stop 216 days later.

The highway’s temporary repair — as the slide area is still considered active — involved lifting the road up 40 feet and dumping the sliding material into Muddy Creek. That fixed the problem but reduced the capacity of Paonia Reservoir, which sits downstream of the slide. It was meant to hold 20,950 acre-feet, but the reservoir today holds roughly 16,000 acre-feet.

Meanwhile, Paonia, with a population of about 1,500, lacks bustle from visitors to wineries, restaurants, organic farms and shops. Julie Bennett, owner of Root and Vine Market and Qutori Wines on Highway 133, said visitors are down 50%.

A problem for nearby Somerset, population 100, has been sparse but fast-moving traffic. Mlakar said that vans transporting coal miners around the washout to the West Elk Mine were ignoring his town’s 25-mile-

per-hour limit, tearing by at 50 mph.

Local law enforcement is problematic, due to the resignation of a Gunnison County deputy. Until a replacement arrives, Delta and Pitkin County sheriff's departments are helping out.

With road damage blocking two roads in Gunnison County and personnel changes to boot, Sheriff Murdie admitted, "It's been a heckuva time."

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