

Road closed due to landslide

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by Matt Kaier

WESTMORE - Route 5A by Lake Willoughby is closed for the next two to four weeks, due to a landslide. A Canadian company has begun work to take down the remaining precarious cliff face.

The landslide sent rocks and debris across Route 5A and into Lake Willoughby late Thursday night, March 28, about three miles south of the intersection of Route 16 and 5A. The boulder-strewn road has since been cleaned up, but it has remained closed because of the likelihood of subsequent landslides.

A geologist who surveyed the cliff after the landslide said the situation is unsafe without taking more of the cliffside down. Coincidentally, the geologist had been to the scene the day before, according to Peter Currier of the Agency of Transportation.

This five-mile section of road borders the east side of Lake Willoughby and is in the perpetual shadow of looming Mount Pisgah. Because of the steep slopes that define this picturesque section of road, small landslides during the spring thaw are common.

"This is one of the bigger slides we've had," said Tom Tetreault, acting general foreman at the site for the Agency of Transportation.

Janod Contractors LTD., a Canadian firm with a base in Swanton, and offices across the country, has been called in to begin the many-staged process of bringing down the remainder of the precarious cliff. They began working on Tuesday with the help of workers from the state garage in Derby.

Roy Perkins, of the state garage in Westmore, said this is a process with "quite a few steps."

The Canadian firm began the process by using fixed ropes and harnesses to scale the cliff and saw down trees and brush surrounding the original slide. Once the area is cleared the crew will be able to better predict the extent of the cliff that must be removed. Workers from the Derby garage aided them by removing the debris that reached the road with front loaders and dump trucks.

Mr. Tetreault expects to continue this process of clearing growth for the remainder of the week. Once there is a clear slope the crew will begin to dismantle the remaining cliff.

"What is left is unstable," Mr. Tetreault said, resulting in the continued closure of the road.

There are several options open to the Janod team for bringing down the remaining cliff. One method is called "high scaling," where the contractors will use undermining, water infusion, or even dynamite to break off the rock ledge.

A much more likely method uses rubber bags inserted into cracks and fissures in the remaining cliff. The bags are then inflated to shear off slabs of rock, said Janod worker Pierre Rousseau of Canada. This technique is quicker than others and bypasses the dangers and permits involved with using explosives such as dynamite. If dynamite is necessitated then the crew will have to drill holes at the top of the cliff to insert the explosive deep below the surface.

Before the crew begins to dismantle the cliff, a road might be covered in a buffer of sand several feet thick to protect the blacktop. If the road is damaged, Mr. Tetreault said they will have to resurface it; just one more step in this intricate process.

Once some of the most threatening rocks have been removed the road might open for traffic at night, but that would not happen for at least two to three weeks, said Dale Perron of the Agency of Transportation.

The Janod contractors have worked with steep cliffs before. Their last job was at a specialty mineral mine, located in northern Massachusetts, where cliff faces nearly quadrupled the height of the Lake Willoughby slide. Mr. Rousseau said he considers the Lake Willoughby site "a small slide."