



Rockslide Blocks Traffic

BY LARA HUETH
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Boulders blockaded Route 5 in Bamet after two large rockslides Wednesday morning.

The slides occurred about a mile south of Comerford Dam Road, where Route 5 runs between north- and southbound Interstate 91.

Currently, the rock face is very unstable and more slides are expected, said Ken Leach, general maintenance supervisor for the Vermont Agency of Transportation.

Leach did not know Wednesday when Route 5 would be open to traffic. State Police said the road may not be open for another three days.

A total of about 750 tons of rock crashed into the roadway, said Leach. The first slide happened around 1 a.m. and no one was injured. About eight to 10 transportation personnel cleaned up the debris and by 6:30 a.m. both lanes of travel were opened to motorists. At that time, Leach was convinced the scene was secure.

Later, a rock ledge shifted and Leach reclosed the road. Route 5 was barricaded just in time; rocks reshowered the roadway around 10 a.m. Some civilian vehicles were still in the area, but no one was injured and no cars were damaged, said Leach.

Route 5 was not gouged by the first slide. Whether the road was damaged in the second slide is unknown as boulders still cover the roadway. Leach does not want transportation workers to begin removing the debris until the rock face is made secure.

Another concern is Interstate 91. Some small rocks tumbled onto the northbound lane. A physical barrier may be erected or traffic slowed when cleanup begins.

A cycle of freezes and thaws is the cause of most rockslides, said Leach. Water seeps into cracks and expands as it freezes. That pressure then dislodges chunks of rock.

That's what prompted the rockslide on Route 5A along Lake Willoughby March 29. Besides that slide in Westmore, the last big rockslide occurred along southbound Interstate 91 in Ryegate about five years ago.

Stabilization is the first step, said Leach. Crews rappel down the rock face and pry boulders loose with hand tools. If that doesn't work, inflatable bags are stuffed into cracks in the rocks. When the bags are filled, the air pressure dislodges the rocks. Those boulders are then smashed with large hydraulic hammers attached to excavators. Blasting is sometimes used to break up large rocks, but it's not likely to be used on Route 5, said Leach.

If all the loose rocks cannot be brought down, they can be pinned to the mother rock, said Leach.

The Vermont Agency of Transportation met with Janod Enterprises, a rock stabilization firm from Quebec, Wednesday afternoon.

Janod Enterprises worked on the Westmore rockslide.

Emergency crews will be delayed, but they will not be obstructed, said Bamet Fire Chief Ron Morse. Firefighters can use Barnet Center Road, Joe's Brook Road, or Little France Road to respond to incidents north of Bamet village. Bamet Rescue is already north of the rockslide and could use Interstate 91 if they needed to access the village, said Morse.