

STATE HIGHWAY 57 WINTER MAINTENANCE

Frequently asked questions

25 JUNE 2020

Will you be closing the road at the first sign of snow or if the weather is bad?

No. We only close roads when conditions become dangerous for people to travel.

Why was the road closed on SH73 the weekend 6 and 7 June 2020?

The decision was taken to close the road due to sections of black ice reappearing, making the road too dangerous for even experienced motorists to travel on. Several South Island Alpine Passes were closed that weekend for this reason.

Why are you concerned with a bit of snow?

We're concerned with both snow and ice and the numbers of vehicles that come off the road. Currently SH73 is more affected by ice than snow, largely due to changing climatic conditions. The snow on SH73 is also wetter which means it ices up quicker and freeze/thaw changes can occur over short periods of time. While it may look like a light covering of snow on the road, vehicles travel over the snow, compact it and this quickly turns into ice, making driving hazardous.

How do you treat ice during a closure?

We use CMA (Calcium Magnesium Acetate) to break up the ice but this takes time. Ploughing 'wet' snow can create ice and traffic also compacts the snow creating ice. In certain conditions, grit can be used but grit is not as effective as CMA in wet conditions. Once CMA has worked, snow can be removed more easily, reducing the formation of ice.

I have a property on SH73 that I need to access. Can I have a permit?

Permits no longer apply now that 'chains essential' has been reinstated. Residents are encouraged to email SH73@nzta.govt.nz with any questions. We are continuing to work with SH73 residents to maximise safe access this winter.

What if I come off the ski field late afternoon and a southerly comes through, making driving difficult? Will I be left to fend for myself?

No. Road crews will be available to provide assistance and we will do a full sweep of the road at the end of the day to ensure no one is stuck or left behind. We advise always carrying chains in case weather conditions change. Please check weather forecasts and plan your journey accordingly.

I live on the West Coast and I need to travel to a medical appointment in Christchurch, how can I be sure I'll get through?

If the weather forecast suggests adverse weather, then Lewis Pass is the alternative route. It is very rare for both routes to be closed at the same time. In an emergency, and when a helicopter can't fly, we work with emergency services to escort ambulances, either through SH73 or SH7.

Why are you letting heavy trucks block the road?

Our obligations are to all users of SH73 including keeping freight moving through to the West Coast. Heavy commercial vehicles are subject to the same conditions as all road users.

Surely you can't apply the same conditions as a city car to a high performance 4x4 vehicle?

Improved vehicle standards have certainly helped safety outcomes over the years. Vehicles needing recovery assistance may also require us to close the road. Over a short period in 2018, east of Castle Hill on SH73, eight of the 11 vehicles which had left the road were 4WDs. Not all incidents are reported through official channels and official crash records only include injury crashes attended by the police. Our anecdotal evidence indicates many vehicles leave the road – while fortunately people aren't hurt, it's a fine line between walking away or not. Also, there's a safety risk to our people every time we recover a vehicle.

Do you consult with residents living in Alpine areas?

We are consulting with local residents, businesses, affected ski field operators and Selwyn District Council to maximise access on SH73 while improving safety for road users and crews working on the road in vulnerable positions in ice and snow conditions with poor visibility.

What data do you have?

There are no recent significant crash statistics because these only show when injuries/fatalities occur and police attend. We are working on improving our data to include all incidents involving vehicles and drivers losing control in snow and ice conditions.

The following data has been made available:

Alpine passes crash/ minor accident/ incident data due to ice/ snow for past winter on SH73 East Coast side of the alps, SH73, Springfield to Rough Creek, Arthur's Pass

- Even without wintry, icy conditions, crews help one to two drivers a week who have gone off the highway/ lost control on a bend.
- In an ice/snow event they are helping six or more drivers/ vehicles get back on the highway/ out of a ditch over a week.
- These wintry weather events with ice and/or snow generally occur between four and six times a winter but it is very hard to predict in advance. Each winter is different.

2019 winter (August was the worse month for closures)

There were four full road closures on SH73 (Arthur's Pass) last winter:

- SH73 was closed for ten hours in August 2019 and had restrictions (chains, no towing vehicles) for a further 25 hours over three days (10,11 and 17 August). Over the whole winter SH73 Canterbury side was closed for 28 hours with 31 hours open with chains and not to towing vehicles.

SH73 West Coast side, Otira through to Rough Creek near Arthur's Pass:

- Arthur's Pass to Otira (SH73) was not closed at all last year, had chains restrictions put on eight times for between three and 19 hours.
- We estimate there are between two and four incidents (eg vehicle slides off road and requires a tow out) every time there is a chains restriction in place, and this number increases depending on the duration of the restriction. We have sensors on vehicles and weather stations in place and we closely monitor the weather conditions before taking the decision to close the road.