

June 2023

Highlights from the 68th Montana State Legislature

Another productive Montana State legislative session has come and gone, with many positive outcomes to highlight related to transportation and funding. To learn more about bills from the 68th session, visit <https://www.leg.mt.gov/>. MDT is excited about the following pieces of legislation, which were passed during this session:

Funding

- HB 267, also known as the SAFER Act, provides \$100 million to MDT to match federal funding requirements. The federal government typically requires MDT to provide a 13% match of funds for construction projects. The bill was signed into law on March 13, 2023, by the Governor.

Safety

- HB 26 generally revised Montana's highway laws related to hauling (commercial, agricultural and recreational traffic) to increase safety. Width restrictions for these traffic types, travel day/time restrictions, and vehicle escort requirements are examples of revisions or new language captured in this bill. The bill was signed into law on April 18, 2023, by the Governor.

Keeping Montana Moving Forward

- HB 60, HB 439 and HB 823 are bills related to electric vehicle (EV) registration and EV tax requirements that will help the state mitigate the loss of gas tax revenue with the continued adoption of EVs in Montana. HB 60 was signed into law on April 19, 2023, HB 439 was signed into law on May 18, 2023, and HB 823 was signed into law on May 3, 2023, by the Governor.
- SB 398 and SB 60 are both bills related to coordinate systems/ geographic information systems (GIS) that will not only benefit MDT's work, but other state agencies as well. SB 398 revises laws related to coordinate systems and updates requirements for use of the Montana coordinate system for defining property boundaries. SB 60 creates a state reference network enterprise fund to provide real-time geospatial location data statewide. SB 398 was signed into law on May 8, 2023, and SB 60 was signed into law on May 4, 2023, by the Governor.
- SB 47/HB 904 both revise state commercial driver's license laws to put Montana in compliance with federal motor carrier

requirements. SB 47 was signed into law on May 19, 2023, and HB 904 was signed into law on May 22, 2023, by the Governor.

- SB 57 expands MDT's ability to use alternative contracting methods in statewide projects. Alternative contracting has proven very successful in pilot projects over the past few years, and MDT looks forward to continuing to employ these methods to benefit contractors, partners and the traveling public of Montana. The bill was signed into law on April 18, 2023, by the Governor.

Red Tape Reduction

- HB 76 was a continuation of the Governor's Red Tape Reduction initiative for Montana. Specifically, it eliminates the administrative burden related to the Bridge and Road Safety Accountability Act (BaRSSA) gas tax for local governments and MDT. The bill was signed into law on April 18, 2023, by the Governor.

Montana Pride

- HB 880 established the huckleberry as the official state fruit of Montana! The bill was signed into law on May 18, 2023, by the Governor.

*HB = House Bill

**SB = Senate Bill



Federal Surface Transportation Program Status

In early 2023, states were informed of an accounting discrepancy at the federal level between the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Fiscal Management Information System (FMIS) and US Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Delphi accounting system. According to FHWA, the discrepancy occurred during USDOT's changeover to Delphi sometime between fiscal years 2003 and 2005. FMIS is the internal system that state DOTs use to track their formula-apportioned contract authority (i.e., ability to spend funds) in the Federal-aid Highway Program and to request project authorizations and reimbursement, while Delphi is the official "system of record" for USDOT. FMIS showed a \$4.7 billion balance in pre-IJJA highway contract authority authorized by Congress, and USDOT's Delphi showed a \$1.2 billion balance. Because USDOT's Delphi is their "system-of-record," the contract authority balance in FMIS needs

to be reconciled to that of Delphi, which would represent a \$3.5 billion reduction in state-held balances of pre-IJJA funding. To date, FHWA and USDOT have been unable to find the root cause of the discrepancy. As a temporary measure, FHWA informed all state DOTs that it is rationing access to pre-IJJA contract funding as the administration looks for ways to fully reconcile the two different accounting system balances. In addition to national conversations around the US approaching its debt ceiling, MDT is carefully monitoring these potential impacts to funding and the economy. We are committed to doing what we can at the state level to ensure good stewardship over Montana's roadways and related funding sources.



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SAVE THE DATES OCTOBER 4 & 5

2023 Annual Transportation Safety Meeting

Delta Colonial Hotel
2301 Colonial Drive, Helena, MT

This event brings together federal, state, tribal, and local safety partners to share implementation of Montana's Comprehensive Highway Safety Plan (CHSP) emphasis areas, assess progress in reducing roadway fatalities and serious injuries, and explore new opportunities to enhance traffic safety awareness.

Emphasis Areas:

- Roadway Departures & Intersection-related Crashes
- Impaired Driving Crashes
- Unrestrained Vehicle Occupants
- Emergency Response -After-Crash Care

The agenda is under development and will be posted at www.mdt.mt.gov/visionzero/plans/chsp-meetings.shtml.

For additional information, please contact Pam Langve-Davis at 406-444-7646 or plangvedavis@mt.gov.

New Billings District Administrator

Michael (Mike) Taylor was recently selected as MDT's new Billings District Administrator. Mike attended college at Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Construction Engineering Technology. Mike began his career with MDT in 1998 as a Civil Engineer (CE) Specialist in construction as a field engineer in the Billings District. From there, Mike held roles that ranged from Engineering Project Manager to District Preconstruction Engineer, before taking the lead of MDT's Billings District in 2023.



Mike Taylor, MDT Billings District Administrator

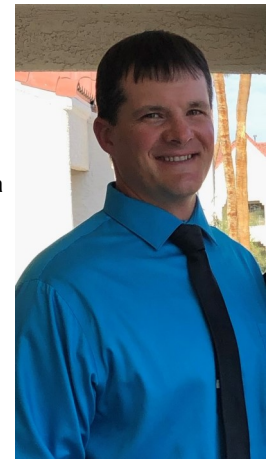
Mike recalls many great experiences during his career with MDT, but says the two best have been working with the department's many talented, hard-working staff, as well as local government partners, to have a positive impact on Montana's communities.

Fun Fact: Outside of his work for MDT, Mike's passion is his kids and following them to various sporting events. With two children running track in college, Mike and his wife stay busy traveling around the region to see them compete. They also travel to visit their oldest son in the US Air Force (USAF), who is currently stationed in Rapid City, SD.

Contact Mike at 406-657-0229 or mictaylor@mt.gov.

New Butte District Administrator

Geno Liva was recently selected as MDT's new Butte District Administrator. Geno attended college at Montana Tech in Butte, graduating with a degree in Mining Engineering and General Engineering. Before beginning his career with MDT over two decades ago, Geno worked for Ground Engineering Consultants in Denver. His first role with MDT was as a Civil Engineer (CE) Specialist on the Road Design team in Helena. After a few roles in Helena, Geno made the move to the Butte District in 2009, where he's remained ever since. Prior to leading MDT's Butte District, Geno served as the District Construction Engineer (2019-2023), the District Construction Operations Engineer (2010-2019), and the District Materials Supervisor (2009-2010).



Geno Liva, MDT Butte District Administrator

Fun Fact: Outside of his work for MDT, Geno spends his time supporting his kids in their various extracurricular activities. He also enjoys hunting and fishing.

Contact Geno at 406-494-9626 or gliva@mt.gov.

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Building (and Rebuilding) Good Roads for Montana: A Message from Director Long

Since 1947, the third Tuesday in June has been recognized as Good Roads Day in Montana. It was designated as such by our state legislature, with the intention of encouraging Montanans to be involved in the safety and improvement of state roadways. Coming out of a productive 68th legislative session, I'm proud to report that "good roads" continues to be a priority for Team MDT, our partners and stakeholders, and the residents of this great state. Legislative wins like the authority to expand use of alternative contracting in more statewide projects will benefit travelers relying on our transportation system for generations to come! (Read more about legislation Team MDT is excited about on page 1...)



Ensuring good roads remain in service can be a challenging but incredibly rewarding job. I had the privilege of traveling to Red Lodge in early May to see the Beartooth Highway for MDT's annual Media Day. It was a day of memories – both new and old – for me as I visited with our dedicated crew that faithfully clears and maintains this All-American Road. Red Lodge and the Beartooth hold special significance to me, with fond memories of summer skiing with family, or attending the annual Christmas Stroll on a Friday before venturing out to cut our perfect tree on Saturday. It's humbling to think of the labor required to construct this scenic highway over a century ago, as well as the many dedicated Montanans who have continued the legacy and take pride in maintaining the Beartooth Highway for travelers from across the globe to enjoy each summer. As our current clearing crew will tell you, the work "definitely makes you appreciate what you do and where you live."

While Montana's landscapes provide great views and recreation, they can impact our transportation infrastructure. The Beartooth crew was also addressing slide damage and clearing debris – not an uncommon occurrence in this rugged landscape. Driving back through Red Lodge, we visited the construction crew hard at work repairing the damage to US Highway 212/Main Street



from the flooding last June. Despite the negative impacts this disaster had on the community, there were positive opportunities that arose during the cleanup and continued repair efforts. One that stands out to me was our contractor's innovative solutions for repairing the damaged roadway and retaining wall. Once this repair project is complete, the community and visitors to the area will be able to enjoy safe, reliable access to and from the Beartooth. The roadway will also be more resilient in the event of future flooding, thanks to the alternative contracting methods employed.

As you venture out this summer making memories with family and friends, I hope you'll join me in celebrating Montana's good roads. Whether it's the third Tuesday in June, or just a sunny weekend in Big Sky Country, good roads keep us all moving forward safely, efficiently, and effectively. On behalf of Team MDT, we are proud to maintain and build (and rebuild) these roads for you!

Safe Travels,
Malcolm D. Long
Director

Pictured above from top to bottom: Director Long poses with JD, MDT's Beartooth Highway mascot; Director Long reviews repairs from flooding damage in Red Lodge

MDT Awarded GHSA Grant for SOAR Program

Montana's Safe On All Roads (SOAR) Program is a tribal traffic safety program implemented by MDT in 2006. Through this program, each tribal community across the state employs their own coordinator with funding through MDT's Highway Traffic Safety Program to educate community members on traffic safety issues.



This year, MDT applied for and received additional funding to support tribal traffic safety education efforts through a grant opportunity offered by the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) and General Motors (GM). This funding was awarded to MDT and other recipients, specifically to reach youth and teens in diverse communities across the country. With these funds, MDT plans to utilize the network of tribal SOAR coordinators and traffic safety partners to reach out to schools in their communities. These partners will then assist local students in establishing a teen peer-to-peer program that will produce distracted driving messaging campaigns for Native American teens.

MDT will distribute \$3,000 to each SOAR coordinator to kick off the peer-to-peer campaign. This funding can help with any aspect of developing and implementing a peer-to-peer traffic safety education opportunity. MDT looks forward to seeing the creative ideas developed through this project and hopes efforts will reduce traffic safety issues for teens in these areas.

Learn more about GHSA and read the official news release announcing the grant recipients for this program here: www.ghsa.org/resources/news-releases/GHSA-Ford-Teen-Mobility-Safety-Grants23

If you have questions about the SOAR program or would like to assist with this project, contact Sheila Cozzie at 406-444-7301 or scozzie@mt.gov.



JD, Beartooth Highway mascot, oversees clearing activities at the 2023 Media Day.

100 Deadliest Days of Summer: Stay Safe in Your Travels!



Montanans are ready to get out and travel our great state! As residents and visitors head out on the roadways to explore Montana, MDT is urging travelers to remember the serious nature of driving and join the commitment to Vision Zero – zero deaths and zero serious injuries on our roadways.

Memorial Day to Labor Day is known as the “100 Deadliest Days of Summer” due to increased traffic deaths nationwide. At other times of the year, the nation often travels less – either by choice or limiting factors such as season or weather conditions. Travelers tend to stay closer to home and use increased caution while driving. However, summer months bring clear roadways and better weather, lowering drivers’ guards.

As of June 5, 2023, 58 deaths have occurred on Montana roads in 2023 compared to 59 in the same time period in 2022. This trend is showing a slight decrease in fatalities, however the contributing factors of speed, not wearing a seat belt and impaired driving continue to contribute to lives lost on our roadways. Whether traveling across town or across the state, Montanans need to do their part and commit to safety.

“No death on Montana roadways is acceptable,” MDT Director Mack Long said. “Folks are out enjoying our beautiful state and great weather, and we want everyone to arrive at their destination safely. It is everyone’s responsibility to stay vigilant while on the road. Crashes are preventable, and so is the pain of losing a loved one.”

While higher speeds and traffic volumes can contribute to the severity of highway crashes, drivers need to remember that crashes – including severe and fatal crashes – don’t just happen on the highway. When traveling in town, on unpaved roads, as well as on the highway, all drivers, riders, bicyclists and pedestrians must take care to be safe. Drivers should always:

- Follow posted speed limits.
- Be rested and give full attention to driving.
- Keep their vehicle in safe running condition.
- Scan their travel area for safety hazards such as wildlife and debris. Expect the unexpected.
- Buckle up and drive sober.
- Share the road. Watch for motorcyclists, pedestrians and bicyclists.

Summer also brings construction season. When traveling across Montana, watch for the “cone zone” and for workers on the roads. These workers spend their days working a short distance from fast-moving vehicles, and while they make every effort to work safely, they are counting on you to pay attention, slow down and be careful as you pass through a work zone.

Each of us has at least one reason to reach our destination safely! The impact of losing just one person to a preventable motor vehicle crash is devastating for family, friends, and communities. If we can each remember that we have a reason to buckle up, watch our speed, arrange a sober ride, and drive distraction-free, arriving safely can be achieved for all travelers. See MDT’s website on Vision Zero for more information:

<https://www.mdt.mt.gov/visionzero/>

MDT is committed to safe engineering and maintaining Montana highways. To learn more about Vision Zero, contact Janet Kenny at 406-444-7417 or jakenny@mt.gov.

Share the Road with Motorcycles this Summer



Montana’s scenic views make it an ideal place for motorcyclists to ‘hit the open road’ when warm weather arrives and it is important to remember that we all share Montana’s roadways and safe behaviors like observing the speed limit, staying alert and only driving sober can mean the difference between a memorable summer ride and the tragedy of life lost on our roads.

Preliminary numbers for 2021 indicate there were 25 motorcycle fatalities in Montana, representing almost 12% of the total fatalities for that year. Of those fatalities, 16 (or 64%) were unhelmeted. These numbers were down slightly from 2020, however, motorcyclists remain an at-risk group for crashes and fatalities in Montana.





“Motorcycles are some of the most vulnerable vehicles on the road,” said Jim Morrow, director of Montana Motorcycle Rider Safety (MMRS). “It is very important for drivers to remember that a motorcycle has the same rights of the road as any other motorist.”


In addition to making Montana’s drivers more aware of motorcycles, this year’s May Motorcycle Safety Awareness Month campaign (example of MDT’s campaign creative and messaging pictured above) targeted motorcycle riders as well. This direction included targeting the “riskiest rider” demographic, or those over the age of 45. Almost 70% of all motorcycle fatalities are aged 45 or over, making this a priority traffic safety issue in Montana.

For more information on MDT’s Motorcycle Traffic Safety Program, contact Sheila Cozzie at 406-444-7301 or scozzie@mt.gov.

Lane Filtering for Motorcycles

An operator of a two-wheeled motorcycle may engage in lane filtering when:

-  the road has lanes wide enough to pass safely
-  the motorcycle does not go above 20mph when overtaking the stopped or slow-moving vehicle
-  the vehicle being passed is stopped or is traveling no more than 10mph
-  the vehicle being passed is in the same direction of travel and the same lane



Montana Traffic Safety Dates

⇒ **May 17, 2023 - June 4, 2023***

Click It or Ticket Law Enforcement Seat Belt Mobilization (2023 STEP)

⇒ **June 30, 2023 - July 5, 2023***

4th of July Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over Law Enforcement Impaired Driving Mobilization (2023 STEP)

⇒ **August 16, 2023 - September 4, 2023***

Labor Day Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over Law Enforcement Impaired Driving Mobilization (2023 STEP)

Note: A total 681.25 hours were worked during the FFY22 Memorial Day Mobilization by 14 participating agencies. A total of 2,046 citations and warnings were issued during this mobilization. A total 969.5 hours were worked during the FFY22 Labor Day Mobilization by 13 participating Agencies. A total of 2,801 citations and warnings were issued during this mobilization. For more information, contact Spencer Harris, MDT Law Enforcement Liaison, at 406-444-0856 or sharris@mt.gov.

⇒ **September 17-23, 2023**

Child Passenger Safety Week (National Seat Check Saturday is September 23, 2023)

⇒ **September 18-24, 2023**

Rail Safety Week (Operation Lifesaver)

⇒ **October 1-31, 2023**

National Pedestrian Safety Month

***Selective Traffic Enforcement Program (STEP) Mobilization Periods**

Stay Safe and Fit While Walking and Bicycling This Summer

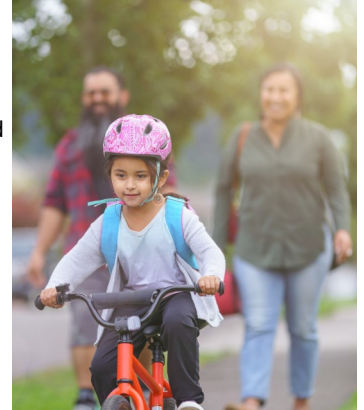
There's nothing like getting outside after a long winter and breathing in some fresh Montana air! Taking a walk or riding a bike to accomplish your errands or commute is the easiest way to get some activity in to your day and enjoy the warmer weather. In line with MDT's goal of Vision Zero, we ask all travelers - motorized and nonmotorized - to be attentive and courteous when using our state's transportation system. Whether you are walking, bicycling, riding, or driving, it's important for everyone to know and follow relevant traffic laws and prioritize safety when out and about. A little courtesy will help everyone reach their destination safely. To celebrate the arrival of warmer weather, MDT would like to remind everyone of some key safety tips.

Be Seen: When you are walking or biking, wear brightly colored and reflective clothing. Pedestrians and bicyclists are much smaller than motor vehicles and harder for a driver to see.

Be Aware: When driving, bicycling, or walking, always remain aware of your surroundings, especially when navigating intersections. It is also important to avoid using cell phones and music players when driving, bicycling, or walking. These devices decrease awareness, are highly distracting.

Be Courteous: When driving give three-to-five feet of space when passing a bicyclist on the roadway. Watch for pedestrians, they have the right-of-way when crossing at marked and unmarked crosswalks at intersections. When turning, look for bicyclists and pedestrians who may be crossing the street at intersections. It's important for everyone to respect each other's rights and space.

Lastly, MDT wants to be a resource for you! If you are planning a bicycle or pedestrian focused event this summer (bike rodeos, health fairs, bicycling or running races, and other events), reach out to us at MDTBikePed@mt.gov. We would love to provide safety signage or materials for events!



Bicycling or walking are great active options for summer travel! Stay safe while out and about with tips and resources from MDT.

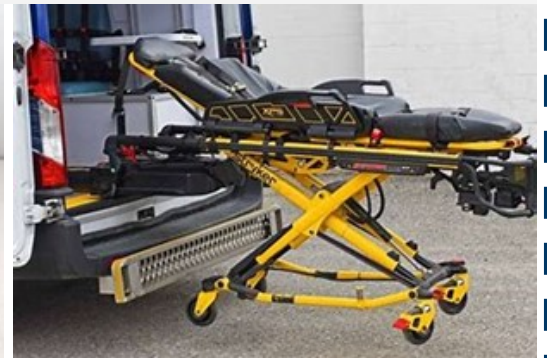
MDT Announces EMS Grant Opportunity, Applications Due June 30, 2023

The state fiscal year (SFY) 2024 Emergency Medical Services (EMS) grant opportunity opened on May 1, 2023, and the deadline for applications is June 30, 2023. The grant is used to enhance traffic safety in Montana by providing grant funds to mostly volunteer, Medicare-level billing providers for emergency response vehicles, ambulances, medical care equipment, communications equipment, and training. The grant provides approximately \$1 million annually, and to-date (since the beginning of the grant program in 2010), 181 awards have been made to Montana Emergency Services providers across the state totaling approximately \$13.85 million. Grant recipients are required to provide a 10% match for any grant funds received.

Online Application: Applications will only be accepted through the Montana Grants and Loan Web grants system at <https://funding.mt.gov/index.do>. Applicants will need to register and submit applications through the web-based system. For more information on eligibility and grant details, please visit MDT's website: <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/business/grants-ems.aspx>.

For more information, contact Spencer Harris at 406-444-0856 or sharris@mt.gov.

Pictured below are examples of vehicles and equipment MDT EMS grant recipients were able to purchase with awarded funds to support their communities.



Final Reports Available for Completed Experimental Features

The MDT Research Section has completed final reports for five experimental feature evaluations completed in 2022. All reports are available on the MDT Experimental Feature Webpage: https://mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/exp_sub_listing.aspx These final reports incorporate all information and documentation of the feature beginning with planning, through construction, and a service evaluation over multiple years.

Chip seal applications: Three of the features are evaluations of different chip seal applications and if a fog seal application aids chip retention through the first couple years. Unfortunately, there were no definitive results generated from the evaluations. Two of the features, Exit 5 – East and Targhee Pass, are in very good condition especially for roadways that are at high elevation and experience heavy winter snow removal activities. For more information, visit the Fog Seal over Chip Seal Applications webpage: https://mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/seal_coat.aspx

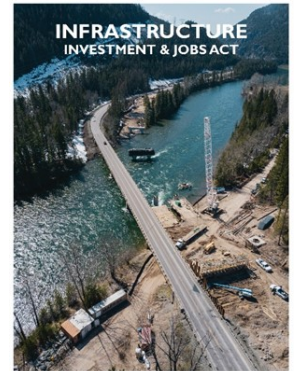
Centerline rumble strips: Another finalized evaluation is focused on one of the first usages in Montana of centerline rumble strips (CLRS). A concern with CLRS is creating a depression in the roadway could lead to paving joint degradation due to water intrusion and harsh freeze/thaw cycles. This section has shown no paving joint degradation, proving that, when constructed correctly, CLRS benefits outweigh the concerns. For a more details, visit the Centerline Rumble Strip webpage: <https://mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/rumblestrip.aspx>

Culvert rehabilitation: The last of final reports for 2022 highlights a culvert rehab product from Sprayroq™. This feature and application are very detailed, for all the information visit the Sprayroq™ Sprawall® webpage: <https://mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/spraywall.aspx> It's important to highlight how this innovative product changed the scope of culvert replacement to culvert rehabilitation. This culvert is beneath I 90 west of Missoula and a replacement would have been extremely expensive and impacted traffic for an extended period. With the Spraywall® application, MDT was able to save money, not impact traffic, and extend the life of the culvert.

MDT will continue to innovate into the future and experimental features continue to be one of the best ways to evaluate innovations. With eight new features planned over the next few years be sure to watch for more reports and subscribe to the final report distribution list if you'd like to receive notifications when final reports are available. Subscribe here: <https://mdt.mt.gov/research/unique/registration.aspx#rpr>

Learn More About MDT's Discretionary Grants Program Online

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), signed into law on November 15, 2021, reauthorizes federal surface transportation programs for the next five years. This represents a historic opportunity to repair one-in-five miles of our roadways and more than 45,000 bridges in the United States. IIJA includes funding to rebuild and reinvest in our railways, public transit infrastructure, the safety of our transportation system, and invest billions in transformational projects that will create good-paying union jobs, grow the economy, and make our transportation system safer and more resilient.



In addition to the continuation of formula funding programs, IIJA provides funding through a wide range of competitive grant programs. Opportunities to apply for the grant programs are noticed by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) through Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFO). The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) aims to package grant applications to leverage federal funding to advance the delivery of projects that align with the department's Mission, Vision, and Goals.

MDT needs are projected to outpace revenue by almost 3 to 1 over the next 10 years and to help fill this gap, MDT will pursue discretionary funding opportunities to the greatest extent practicable. To date, MDT has submitted applications for the following programs:

- Bridge Investment Program (BIP)
- Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant Opportunity (MPDG)
- Railroad Crossing Elimination (RCE)
- Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE)
- Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART)

MDT has developed a Discretionary Grants Program website to share information, provide an easy form for local officials to request support, and help local entities understand and navigate the discretionary grant process. To learn more, visit the MDT Discretionary Grant Programs web page: <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/business/discretionarygrants/>. When submitting requests for support to MDT, please allow ample time for processing in advance of the grant deadlines.

Beartooth Highway Annual Clearing Complete for 2023

Each spring, MDT is responsible for clearing the Beartooth Highway to the Montana/Wyoming border, where the National Park Service takes over maintenance responsibilities through Wyoming, back into Montana, and into Yellowstone Park. MDT and NPS coordinate closely to keep the road open throughout the summer. The highway opened for the 2023 season on Friday, May 26th. Weather-related closures or travel impacts on this seasonal route are not uncommon, so check MDT 511 and other travel resources before planning your trip: <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/>



WATCH: 2023 Beartooth Clearing Playlist on YouTube

Opening the Beartooth Highway is a huge undertaking! Check out the videos from 2023 by visiting MDT's YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/user/MontanaDOT) or by scanning the QR code to the right with your mobile device.

A Significant Undertaking: I 15 in Wolf Creek Canyon (Part 3)

By Jon Axline, MDT Historian

Montana's Wolf Creek Canyon illustrates the evolution of transportation through this geological wonder from aboriginal trail to modern freeway. The passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 created the Interstate Highway Program, the world's greatest public works project. Interstate 15 (I 15) through the canyon marked the culmination of a century of road development. Unlike prior road-building efforts in the canyon, though, this time it would mean a considerable amount of heavy equipment, round-the-clock construction, and a lot of dynamite. For I 15, the canyon would make way for the highway, not the other way around as it had been in the past.

Planning for I 15 north of Helena began during World War II, when the Montana State Highway Commission mapped out the state's post-war defense highway system. In 1957, the Commission established the routes the interstate would take through the state. Initially, they investigated two routes north from Helena through the canyon. As with the pioneer road builders a century before, the canyon presented unique challenges to the engineers. Cost was an important consideration for the Commission along with future maintenance expenditures. They looked at how to best insert a four-lane highway into a confined space already occupied by a blue-ribbon trout stream, US Highway 91 (US 91), the Great Northern Railway, and the community of Wolf Creek. The commissioners investigated a third alternative east of the canyon along the Missouri River and Holter Lake. Ultimately, the highway commission chose the most cost-effective alignment through the canyon – the route the interstate follows today. But there would be significant impacts to Little Prickly Pear Creek and the community of Wolf Creek.

There were two major firsts for the I 15 Wolf Creek Canyon project. It was the first project where the Montana Highway Department hired a consultant, Morrison-Maierle, to do the design work. It was also the first where environmental impacts caused by the four-lane roadway were a point of contention with the public. The Montana Fish and Game Commission and several area sportsmen's groups opposed the preferred alternative because, they felt, it would cause irreparable harm to the Little Prickly Pear Creek fishery. At a public hearing held at the Wolf Creek school in March 1961, the Fish and Game Commission and its supporters loudly voiced their opposition to the preferred alignment. At what quickly became a contentious hearing, egged on by a member of the legislature opposed to the interstate, the highway department Planning Survey Manager Howard Buswell angrily told the crowd that it was a "matter of whether the canyon is more important for highways or for fishing." The engineers, in collaboration with the Fish and Game Commission, eventually designed a series of check dams and "lifts and drops" on the creek to preserve the trout habitat. It was because of the Wolf Creek Canyon segment of I 15 that Fish and Game created the SPA-124 Authorization program that still exists at Fish, Wildlife and Parks today. Surprisingly, one important issue that caused little comment at the hearing was the impact of the interstate on the community of Wolf Creek.

Once the environmental issues had been settled, the Highway Commission awarded the first of several contracts for I 15 through Wolf Creek Canyon in October 1961. The first contract for 3.4 miles of four-lane highway at the southern end of the canyon was an enormous and complicated undertaking. The head of the canyon was barely wide enough to accommodate the creek, US 91, and the railroad. The highway commissioners awarded the \$2 million contract to two companies, the Bud King Construction Company of Frenchtown and McLaughlin, Inc. of Great Falls. Because the narrow canyon was also the route of US 91, the contractors had to keep the old highway open during construction of the interstate.

The job of inserting a four-lane road at the south end of the canyon was monumental and involved round-the-clock construction to meet the Commission's deadline for completion of the project. It required the construction of enormous fill slopes and sweeping curves to maintain the 50 mph design speed of the interstate through the canyon. But, primarily, it involved a lot of blasting to widen the entrance to the canyon. The



An aerial photo shows highway construction at the south entrance of the canyon.

contractors posted flagmen at each end of the construction zone to prevent traffic from passing through when the blasting occurred. Traffic could travel unimpeded through the construction zone from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. each day. Otherwise, they were subject to delays that could run anywhere from 30 minutes to eight hours. In a few cases, US-91 could be closed for over a day when "blasting sent a mountain of rock [down] on the narrow roadway." In cases of extended road closures, the contractor posted notices in the Helena Independent Record and the Great Falls Tribune. The contractor encouraged motorists to take a 30-mile detour over either Stemple or Flescher passes. In all, the contractors removed one and half million cubic yards of material to make way for the highway.

In January 1963, the Commission awarded the contract for the next segment of I 15 to the Great Falls-based F & S Contracting Company. The second segment began where the first ended, and stretched north 2.3 miles to the confluence of the Lyons and Little Prickly Pear creeks. The commission also awarded a contract to Sletten Construction Company to build two bridges on the segment, including the Spring Creek interchange. It would provide access to the US 91 (now known as Recreation Road) and Little Prickly Pear Creek for fishing.

In September 1964, the Commission let the third segment to contract, from Lyons Creek to just north of Wolf Creek. The F & S Contracting Company was also the winner of that project. In July 1964, the large corrugated steel culvert installed to carry Little Prickly Pear Creek under I 15 failed. The failure generated statewide newspaper headlines and significantly delayed the completion of the Lyons Creek South segment. In 1966, Strandberg & Associates built the first Montana interstate rest area on Lyons Creek. Today, it functions as a truck parking area. Finally, in 1968, all three segments totaling 14 miles along with 10 bridges were completed, and I 15 through Wolf Creek Canyon opened to traffic. The cost of the projects totaled \$10 million (nearly \$86 million in current dollars).

One can't help but wonder what those early road builders would think about sweeping curves and large fill areas of the Wolf Creek Canyon today. In the 1860s, the road had to adapt to the rugged terrain of the canyon. The interstate made the canyon conform to the highway. One constant has been the spectacular scenery of the Wolf Creek Canyon. Despite the projects' detractors, Chief Engineer Fred Quinnell was correct when he stated the "new road will add to the beauty of the canyon and, with the new wide four lane highway, drivers and passengers alike will have more opportunity to view the natural beauty of the rock walls of the canyon and enjoy the ever-changing colors of the landscape."

Read parts 1 and 2 of this three-part series in the September and December 2022 issues of the Newsline:
www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/newsletters/newsline.aspx

MDT Wants Your Comments on New Projects

To receive a list of highway projects MDT plans to present to the Transportation Commission, please visit www.mdt.mt.gov/other/webdata/external/planning/proposed_proj.pdf, www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/stip.shtml, or call (800) 714-7296. You can mail comments on proposed projects to MDT Project Analysis Manager, PO Box 201001, Helena, MT 59620-1001 or email them to mdtstip@mt.gov.

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Contact Information

Only the most frequently requested numbers are listed here. For an area or person not listed, call 800-714-7296 (in Montana only) or 406-444-3423. The TTY number is 800-335-7592.

- Newsline Editor-Lauren Eichenfels (leichenfels@mt.gov) 406-444-7614**
 Planning Division Administrator-Rob Stapley (rostapley@mt.gov) 406-444-3445
 Bike/Ped-Shelby Clark (mdtbikeped@mt.gov)..... 406-444-9273
 Environmental-Tom Martin (tomartin@mt.gov) 406-444-0879
 Highway Traffic Safety-Janet Kenny (jakenny@mt.gov)..... 406-444-7417
 Map Orders-www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/maps.aspx 406-444-6119
 Multimodal Planning-Carol Strizich (cstrizich@mt.gov)..... 406-444-9240
 System Impact-LeRoy Wosoba (lwsoba@mt.gov)..... 406-444-9233
 Projects-Paul Johnson (paujohnson@mt.gov)..... 406-444-7259
 Road Data & Mapping-Brian Andersen (brandersen@mt.gov) 406-444-6111
 Secondary Roads-Andy White (awhite@mt.gov).. 406-444-9194
 Traffic Data-Becky Duke (bduke@mt.gov)..... 406-444-6122
 Transit-Adam Kraft (akraft@mt.gov) 406-444-6120

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Helena, Montana 59620-1001
 PO Box 201001

2701 Prospect Avenue
Montana Department of Transportation
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