

# OURAY COUNTY WATCH

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## Corkscrew Gulch Now Open After Road Restructuring

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*County and Forest Service at Odds Over Backcountry Road Work*

RED MOUNTAIN PASS – Corkscrew Gulch is finally open, if temporarily, after a long wait for four-wheel-drive enthusiasts. The Ouray County Road and Bridge Department will begin work later this month to reverse damage done to the road by the U.S. Forest Service last summer.

The repair work is the final chapter in a controversy over the maintenance of local backcountry roads and trails. Last year, in an attempt to control erosion on the roads, the forest service installed structures known as water bars, or ditches that run perpendicular to the roadbed, to divert water from running down the roads. The work was performed on numerous local roads including Corkscrew Gulch, Brown Mountain, Grey Copper Road, and Engineer Pass from U.S. Hwy. 550.

According to USFS Engineer Tom Condos, money for the work was appropriated by the U.S. Congress for the purpose of stabilizing old mining roads and reducing stream sedimentation resulting from the erosion of dirt from those roads.

“We haven’t done any road work up there for 50 or 60 years,” said Condos, who oversaw the work. “That’s why Congress said you need to start doing something with the old mining roads that are causing unacceptable sedimentation in the rivers.” However, Condos could not cite any studies of sedimentation done on local streams, or any current research on the effects of the work done to reduce sedimentation.

Condos’s statement also makes light of the clearing and maintenance that county road crews perform yearly on the same roads; Ouray County Road and Bridge Superintendent Chris Miller said that two men are up on the roads full time throughout the summer, working to clear the roads of snow, rock and debris and keep the drainages and roadbeds maintained.

The forest service had contacted the county road and bridge department about pending road work, but the nature of the work and the starting date remained unclear to road crews until the work was in progress. “We started getting calls from the jeep companies that someone was up there with a bulldozer tearing up the roads,” Miller said.

According to Condos, the work was done according to “our standard guidelines and formulas.” The guidelines, however, were not necessarily developed for the unique circumstances of the steep and rocky San Juan Mountains, much less the especially wet monsoon season that occurred last summer, shortly after much of the work was completed. “It was a force fit, and it’s not paying off for this location,” he said.

Reg Cridler disagreed that the work was done correctly. A former forester for the Uncompahgre National Forest, Cridler asserted that the forest service installed what is known as “tank traps,” water bar-type structures that are designed for logging roads meant to be decommissioned.

“It’s a complicated subject, but there are ways to do it that don’t result in so much soil erosion,” Cridler said. “There wasn’t serious water damage being done to the roads to begin with, and when you go in and rip up the roads, [the road bed] has to settle out.”

Unfortunately, before the soft dirt had a chance to compact, the monsoons hit, then the winter snows, creating mud holes big enough to trap jeeps and even a county maintenance truck that crews took up Corkscrew Gulch earlier this summer to assess the snowpack and to see how the forest service’s water bars had held up. They found out quickly. When they re-crossed the first water bar on their way back down, “the truck sank up to the frame,” Miller said. “Half the bed was gone.”

The steep and appropriately named Corkscrew Gulch Road was the site of the worst damage. According to Cridler, when the forest service installed water bars on Corkscrew Gulch, the diverted water ran right off the roadbed and directly onto the switchback below. The mistake caused complete failure of the roadbed. According to Condos, repairing the road will require reestablishing the roadbed along an historical alignment, as the damage to the road as currently aligned is irreparable. Miller said that the current, newer alignment will be maintained only for emergency access, while most traffic will be diverted onto the old, rebuilt road and around the worst section of damage.

It wasn’t only the roads that were hard hit by the forest service’s work. The Albany Loop Trail, site of cooperative trail work done by the forest service and the Ouray Trails Group in recent years, was bulldozed and adjacent wetlands were damaged, according to Trails Group representative Karen Risch.

“The first we knew of it was when hikers started calling us,” Risch said. “They were anguished because the Albany Loop Trail, which includes an old mining road that hadn’t been used as a road for a long time and was beautifully going back to nature, had been bulldozed.” The group also found that part of the Ironton Nordic ski trail had been torn up. “It’s hard to put how upset we were,” she said.

When the group found that bulldozers were slated to go into Spirit Gulch on Red Mountain Pass, they protested. “The road was still locked because of the mining situation there,” she said. “We were just vociferous, and they did back off. It was a really bad situation.”

Risch said she felt that the machinery used was “overkill,” and that there was a lack of supervision. A Freedom of Information request from Bill Sutton, retired USFS engineer and Condos’s predecessor, to Forest Supervisor Charlie Richmond echoed her sentiments.

“I was stunned by the environmental disturbance caused by the number, the frequency, the location, and the severity of unnecessary waterbars (also referred to as ‘tank traps’) on [the Poughkeepsie and Cunningham Gulch] routes,” Sutton wrote. His request was met with the offer of a meeting with Condos, a meeting that he rejected. “I already know what the group you suggest will do and say and what will happen,” Sutton responded to Condos. “It would be a waste of time. Other meetings have been held and nothing has been accomplished.”

As it stands now, all the roads are open, the forest service has spent their money and has no plans to install more water bars, and the Trails Group is resigned to what has been done.

“It’s in the past; we’re living with it at this point,” Risch said. “It’s pretty hard to undo what a bulldozer has done.”

For his part, Sutton is not ready to let sleeping dogs lie. “I’m pleased the issue is still alive and hope that meaningless meddling on stable routes will cease. What was done was unacceptable and done for the wrong reasons,” he wrote in a June 26 email to The Ouray County Watch. “Any natural physical impairment which will limit overuse is far more desirable than restrictive signing, regulations and enforcement. To over-maintain any four-wheel-drive route and then complain about the increased use is simply folly.”

The county plans to close Corkscrew Gulch for repairs on July 21-24 and 28-31, leaving it open on weekends for jeepers. Negotiations are underway between the county and the forest service regarding compensation for repairs to damages precipitated by the forest service’s work.