94 MILFORD ROAD NEWS December 2020

Making the Homer Tunnel even safer

One of the specially designed speakers that have been installed inside the Homer Tunnel.

Work has started on a $25million safety upgrade of Southland's Homer Tunnel on SH94 providing a welcome economic boost for the Te Anau community.

The Milford Road Alliance has made a start on $3m worth of 'shovel ready' smaller safety improvements that come out of recommendations of an investigation into a car fire in the tunnel at the beginning of this year.

Work completed so far includes an upgraded tunnel power system and lighting and fitting new speakers inside the tunnel to communicate with people caught there in an emergency. A new protected duct is also being built along the full 1.2km length of the tunnel to protect cabling, fibre and other systems during a fire.

Over the next year, an extra lane will be built at the Eastern tunnel traffic signal (back toward the tunnel control building) for better management of traffic during winter, and more sophisticated in-tunnel vehicle detection systems installed. The remaining $22M being invested in improving safety at the tunnel is likely to fund one or more of the following: pedestrian refuges (to escape a fire), forced ventilation system (to reduce a fire spread) or a deluge system (to limit and contain a fire). Whatever option is chosen it will be large and complex work needing significant design, consenting and other approvals, and is likely to be delivered over the next 2 to 3 years.

Milford Road storm repairs turn the corner

Solid progress is being made on fixing major damage on several sections of the Milford Road between the Hollyford Valley turn-off and Milford Sound, caused by a severe rainstorm in February. This $8m project involves repairs ranging from road wash outs, replacing infrastructure such as damaged retaining walls, and resurfacing large sections of road pavement torn up by flood waters.

One of the bigger and more challenging jobs is repairing a large retaining wall supporting the highway near the Hollyford Road intersection, with work continuing well into next year. Several sections of road require resurfacing over summer, to replace temporary surfaces used to get the road open as quickly as possible for Milford Sound tour operators. Repair crews have been able to accelerate work, with 70 percent less traffic on the Milford Road since the COVID-19 pandemic closed New Zealand's borders in March to overseas visitors.

Highway retaining wall repair work between the Hollyford Valley Road turn-off and the Homer Tunnel.

Hollyford Road re-opens for summer

The Hollyford Valley Road was hard hit by the February rainstorm. Owned by the Southland District Council, maintenance of this road is fully funded by Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency.

Around $2M in emergency works funding was made available to restore the road to what it was prior to the storm. This has been partly accomplished with the Milford Road Alliance carrying out work that saw the first 13km of the road from to Girder Creek reopened earlier this month. People can walk the remaining 3km to the end of the road. Significant work is required to restore this section of road destroyed by floods. The plan is to undertake this at traditionally the lowest river flow time of year (February-April) and reopen the road fully after that. Waka Kotahi, the Milford Road Alliance, Department of Conservation and Ngai Tahu all worked closely together to find a way to re-open this iconic road. Thanks to their collective efforts this has been achieved.

Girder Creek following the storm

After the completion of repairs

Avalanche season a testing time

Nearly 250 avalanches were observed along the Milford Road during the 2020 Avalanche season – slightly down on last year. Warmer conditions and shorter severe storms were likely reasons for this drop. However, snow volumes were slightly bigger than in 2019. This saw several large avalanches carrying a lot of snow debris, one of these from Mt Macpherson contained 167,000 tonnes of snow. Pictured below, a smaller avalanche from the "Raspberry" avalanche path.

Part of the avalanche management approach is not to let snow volumes build up. This sees more, smaller manmade avalanches triggered to offset a natural snow build-up and to help avoid the large and destructive avalanches that could close the Milford Road for long periods.

Several new avalanche technology ideas (to both this country and internationally) were tested along the Milford Rd this winter, including ultrasound avalanche detection, rain radar and high-tech snowpack scanning. International scientists and Milford Road Alliance staff joined forces for this testing. Once results have been analysed, it may pave the way for new tools to strengthen the Milford Rd avalanche management programme and other similar programmes around the world.

New Zealand Government