

Yellowstone's west roads open Friday

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CODY -- Crews in Yellowstone National Park have been working to clear unusually deep snow in preparation for Friday's opening to automobile traffic of the park's West Entrance, and some other roads.

Friday marks the start of the park's summer season, after Yellowstone received its heaviest snowfall in a decade, causing breakdowns recently in some snow-plowing equipment.

Park officials cautioned that deep snow may complicate early season backcountry travel, even on boardwalks and developed paths, adding that snowshoes or cross-country skis may be required in many areas.

Plowing roads in and around the park, including parts of the Beartooth Highway, will cost about \$900,000, up from \$779,000 last year. The increase is mainly due to higher prices for the biodiesel fuel used by heavy equipment.

Roads scheduled to open Friday include from the West Entrance to Madison, from Mammoth to Norris to Madison to Old Faithful, and from Norris to Canyon.

Yellowstone saw a record 3.1 million visitors in 2007, a 10 percent increase over 2006. The biggest gains in visitation came at the East Entrance, which had seen frequent closures and delays during previous years for road construction.

"Last year gave us a good indication of how successful this year can be, as there were minimal delays and no nighttime closures," said Claudia Wade, marketing director for the Park County Travel Council in Cody.

Wade said this year will be only the second in the past decade when no major construction was planned on the state highway or park roads between Cody and Fishing Bridge.

Advance reservations for campgrounds and hotels show strong demand, particularly from international travelers, said Rick Hoeninghausen, director of sales and marketing for Xanterra Parks & Resorts, Yellowstone's principal lodging concessionaire.

Rising fuel prices have not scared away visitors in previous years, and a strong Euro compared to the dollar means travel to the United States is a bargain, he said.

This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the 1988 fires that burned more than one-third of the park and threatened several historic structures in and around Yellowstone.

Hoeninghausen said a documentary on the event is still the second-best-selling video in park gift shops, adding that he is working to gather experts this summer to commemorate the fires and examine how Yellowstone has changed since.

Other roads are scheduled to open on the following dates:

* May 2: Canyon to Lake to East Entrance.

* May 9: Tower to Tower Fall; Lake to West Thumb to Old Faithful; South Entrance to West Thumb. Cooke

City, Mont., over Colter Pass to Chief Joseph Scenic Highway intersection to Long Lake gate will open as soon thereafter as possible.

* May 23: Tower Falls to Canyon over Dunraven Pass; Long Lake Gate to Red Lodge over Beartooth Pass, if snow and plow conditions allow.