

Introduction to the Vail Pass Project

R. A. Prosenice, Colorado Department of Highways, Grand Junction

When the original 64 400-km (40 000-mile) Interstate highway system was first approved by Congress in the 1940s, I-70 began in Washington, D.C., and ended in Denver, Colorado. Travelers who wanted to stay on the Interstate system west of Denver had to turn north to Cheyenne, Wyoming, and then west on I-80 or south into New Mexico and then west on I-40. Colorado and Utah jointly expressed concern over the fact that their state capitals were not joined by a more direct Interstate route. In 1957, as a result of lobbying by Colorado and Utah legislators, Congress authorized a 1600-km (1000-mile) increase in the Interstate system, increasing the authorized length of the system to 66 100 km (41 000 miles). Shortly thereafter, Utah and Colorado were granted over 480 km (300 miles) of this additional authorized 1600 km, and I-70 was extended west from Denver to a connection with I-15 south of Salt Lake City.

When the extension was granted in 1958, Colorado promptly began studies of possible alternative routes for I-70 through the Continental Divide and across the mountains west of Denver. After extensive studies and a great deal of discussion, a decision was made to generally follow the route of US-6 west from Denver through the Continental Divide at the Straight Creek location (where the Eisenhower Tunnels will soon be completed) and then west across Vail Pass.

During the course of the studies, it became evident that an alternative route bypassing Vail Pass was available. The alternative was known as the Red Buffalo route since it passed between Red Peak and Buffalo Mountain west of Dillon, Colorado. The Red Buffalo route would have reduced the distance between Dillon and Vail by more than 16 km (10 miles) and for that reason was favored by the Colorado Division of Highways. The alternative was studied in detail and presented as the recommended route at a corridor public hearing held in Frisco, Colorado, in 1966. The proposal immediately became controversial and was the stimulus for the first confrontation between environmentalists and highway engineers in the state of Colorado.

The westerly section of the recommended route emerged from a tunnel under the ridge that separates the Blue River drainage and the Gore Creek drainage and passed through a segment of the Gore Creek primitive area. The Wilderness Act allowed the Secretary of Agriculture to grant a highway right-of-way through the Gore Creek primitive area if he felt it was in the public interest to do so. Early in 1968, however,

Secretary of Agriculture Orval Freeman issued a decision that it would not be in the public interest to grant a right-of-way through this area. Congress has since officially designated the Gore Creek area as wilderness.

Adverse geological conditions were the primary reason the Colorado Division of Highways had hoped to avoid constructing a four-lane freeway over Vail Pass. While making a survey for an improved two-lane highway over Vail Pass in 1956, the division had discovered that, in the 17 years since the existing road was constructed, in one area it had crept 15 m (50 ft) down the mountain from the location on the "as-constructed" plans. Many other evidences of geologic weakness were apparent even to unpracticed eyes.

Shortly after the negative decision was reached on a right-of-way for the Red Buffalo route, the Colorado Division of Highways began extensive preliminary studies of the Vail Pass route. The first study concerned geology. Division geologists were asked where it might be possible to build a facility of this kind, avoiding the unstable ground that we were sure would cause significant problems. So it can be said that geology largely controlled the location of I-70 over Vail Pass.

Early in public meetings, great concern was expressed about the effect the project would have on water quality on both sides of Vail Pass, since West Tenmile Creek on the east side and Black Gore Creek on the west side furnish water to adjacent mountain communities. The department approached the project with full knowledge that we were in an area of severe geologic problems, that the countryside was environmentally sensitive, and that maintaining water quality was an extremely important consideration. The papers in this Record detail how these problems were solved.

The Vail Pass route segment traverses some very beautiful mountain terrain. Early in the project, a team of professionals that included the highway division's consultant, International Engineering Company; personnel from the U.S. Forest Service and the Colorado Division of Wildlife; and our own engineers and landscape architects came together in a joint effort to produce a highway project that would not result in severe, permanent environmental damage to this part of Colorado. We acknowledge and appreciate the assistance and participation we received from all of these agencies and individuals.