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State Highway 1 south of Kaikoura reopens after quakes

CHARLIE MITCHELL AND NICHOLAS JONES

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Transport Minister Simon Bridges turns a tinsel-wrapped Stop Go sign at the Kahutara Bridge to officially reopen SH1 south of Kaikoura.

A crucial road to Kaikoura has been re-opened.

State Highway 1 south of the earthquake-damaged town is now open to the public, Transport Minister Simon Bridges announced on Wednesday.

It ends more than a month of isolation for Kaikoura, with the highway on both sides closed due to damage.

JOHN VASTA

Extensive efforts were made to clear landslips and other damage from SH1 south of Kaikoura.

"Road crews have been working 12-hour days, seven days a week to get the highway south of Kaikoura re-opened in time for the busy holiday period," Bridges said.

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"Honestly, if you'd asked me at the start of all this, I would have thought the ability to get it up and running before Christmas would have been a pipe-dream, but you've done it."

JOHN VASTA

Long hours and hard work have paid off as SH1 south of Kaikoura is officially reopened.

The inland road connecting Kaikoura to Waiau was re-opened earlier this week.

Traffic on the re-opened highway would be restricted to daylight hours, between 6am and 8pm, until all slip faces were stabilised and traffic signals installed.

Bridges met road workers before the re-opening. He said it was "a real milestone" and the thanks should be directed at the roading contractors.

ALDEN WILLIAMS/FAIRFAX NZ

The inland route to Kaikoura had already reopened to general use.

Many had declined to tell him how hard they were working as they weren't sure it was legal.

Ad Feedback

The work had been sped up with help from locals; Whale Watch staff turned signs and did monitoring on the highway while the business was still unable to operate.

It was a small but welcome sign of progress for those working and living in what some were calling "New Zealand's biggest cul-de-sac."

Business had been much slower in Cheviot since it suddenly became the end of the road heading north.

"It might make a little bit of a difference – it's fabulous and fantastic for Kaikoura and for us to have it open, but I don't think it's going to have a huge impact," said Debbie Anderson, who runs Cheviot's Two Rivers cafe.

"I think it's given a bit of a morale boost, but I don't think it's worth dancing in the streets about."

This year's tourist season was a write-off, but businesses had kept going due to the goodwill of those nearby.

"Up until now we've had an amazing response from Christchurch. We've had the sympathy vote, and our locals have been amazing as well. We've managed to keep going."

Locals were promoting the Leader Loop, effectively the scenic route to Hanmer Springs which goes through Cheviot.

Eve Parkin, owner of the Kaikoura Peketa Beach Holiday Park, said things had been "desperate" since the earthquake, and today was a huge boost.

"We are extremely excited, today. I think [people will start coming back] - just look, isn't it beautiful?"

Cars were now heading south, drivers leaning out their windows to return a "merry Christmas" from a red nose-wearing road worker.

THE ALLIANCE

Bridges also announced an "alliance" between agencies to work on the critically damaged highway north of Kaikoura.

The work would be led by the NZ Transport Agency (NZTA) and Kiwirail, which would be joined by various contractors.

An Order in Council, signed by Governor-General Dame Patsy Reddy on Tuesday, modified several pieces of legislation, effectively speeding up work by "cutting through red tape."

"We can get stuck in, and really attack the slips and the problems to get that road back up as fast as we can," Bridges said.

It would take roughly a year for both road and rail to be re-opened, he said.

"The road will need to be improved... it will need to be widened, in some places it will need to be changed. We'll try to do it quicker than that but realistically we're looking at around a year.

"The unfortunate truth is that it's a much harder job [than work on the south] and will take longer."

The speed of progress north of Kaikoura was criticised last week by Clarence farmer John Murray.

Murray told Prime Minister Bill English and Civil Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee that "nothing has bloody well happened," and roads were being patched up but not fixed to be usable.

For those living north of Kaikoura, salvation was still a long way off.

Clarence farmer Derrick Milton – owner of three stranded cows that briefly achieved international celebrity – said on Wednesday it was difficult to get supplies and equipment to his farm.

"We have just learnt that it's going to be like that, and we've just got to put up with it," he said.

He had no idea at the time his cows had become a global sensation.

"At that time we were really cut off. We didn't have any idea at the time... People from overseas [eventually] rang us up."

A FESTIVE DRIVE

As cars headed south on the newly opened SH1, drivers rolled down their window to return a "Merry Christmas" from a red nose-wearing road worker.

Bridges turned a tinsel-wrapped Stop Go sign, wrapped in tinsel, at the Kahutara Bridge to officially reopen the route.

About 50 road workers and contractors watched him do it, some with Rudolph ears and Santa hats attached to their hard hats.

Bridges said it became apparent a couple of weeks ago that the road might reopen before Christmas, and the teams working on it had gone above and beyond.

"I've asked a lot of them how long they have been working. In many cases they have effectively said, 'we don't want to tell you because we're not sure we are allowed to work that hard'. But they have done it, and hats off to them."

Derrick Millton, a Kaikoura District Councillor, was at the bridge to see the road officially open.

Millton's Clarence farm is off SH1 north of Kaikoura, and it was his cows that were marooned on a patch of grass after the quake - with television images of the animals' plight going around the world.

He said the opening was "seriously good news" for Kaikoura residents.

"They have been through all sorts of pressure - they have run out of food, they have had serious things going wrong. They have got through all of that now, and good on them."

To the north of Kaikoura, Millton said it was difficult to get equipment and supplies for the farm, but they were getting used to it.

"We have just learnt that it's going to be like that, and we've just got to put up with it."

The Government has committed to rebuilding SH1 and the rail route both north and south of Kaikoura, estimating that could cost up to \$2 billion.

On Wednesday, Bridges said he still thought opening SH1 to the north could be about a year away.

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