



NEWS



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To rescue mountain residents, San Bernardino County's snowcats create their own roads

By Brian Rokos, SB SUN

March 11, 2023



San Bernardino County Fire Capt. Don Whitesell stands on the treads one of the department's snowcats on Friday, March 10, 2023, in Lake Arrowhead. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

These cats have serious fangs.

While the saviors of the biggest snowstorm to hit the [San Bernardino Mountains](#) in years have been the volunteers organizing food giveaways, and the emergency workers assisting trapped or ill residents and clearing roads, the mechanical heroes have been the **San Bernardino County Fire Department's** snowcats.

These go-everywhere vehicles that ride on tank tracks answered hundreds of the 1,500 calls for firefighters' help during the height of the storm, including 12 fires, lugging firefighters, paramedic and rescue equipment as well as fire hoses and nozzles when there were no other means to reach homes and businesses.

The powerful snowcats roll over deep snow and up and down berms at steep angles.

"You're not limited to roads," said Capt. Don Whitesell, who has operated snowcats for 20 years. "You can actually veer off-road cross country, you can get into some places that maybe the road wouldn't be passable, maybe there are trees down, lines down. You can create your own road along the way."

The versatility means the snowcat crews don't have to wait for a plow to clear the roads.

"We have yet to have someone call 911 and we have not been able to get to them, and that is thanks in no small part to the snowcats," said Eric Sherwin, a county fire spokesman.

Whitesell has seen firsthand the reactions of those who have been rescued.

"Most of them were amazed that we were able to get to them. For a lot of people, it was a last-ditch effort to try to get rescued. They didn't know how it was going to happen," Whitesell said. "There was a feeling of defeat and hopelessness until we rolled up. Their demeanor changed because they realized they were not abandoned, they were not alone."

Friday's storm brought rain to all but the highest elevations, and next week's system is forecast for more of the same, so the county is transitioning to the more typical response of sending fire engines to calls. But the snowcats are still being used to access backcountry areas such as campgrounds and off-road areas where fun-seekers get stuck in snow, Sherwin said.

The county's fleet of eight snowcats is housed at fire stations from Wrightwood to Forest Falls. There is room for two people in the cab and 10 in the bay, including patients on stretchers. They don't have water pumps but can get closer to burning buildings than fire engines and hook up their hoses to the engines' water supply. The snowcats are equipped with 10-foot-wide plows. Each vehicle costs around \$100,000.

Firefighters train for a minimum of 20 hours on the snowcats, first on roads and then on more difficult terrain. Some operators have logged hundreds of hours behind the wheel, which resembles a video game control. The snowcats can travel up to about 25 mph and turn on a dime by braking one track and engaging the other.

Although the snowcats weigh more than five tons, they don't sink in the snow because the wide tracks displace the weight over a large footprint, Sherwin said.

"Probably one of the coolest pieces of equipment to drive," Whitesell said, "because it makes access in some very difficult areas that we normally wouldn't be able to get to. It's something we don't get to do every day and when we do operate them, it's usually because of extreme need."

Plus, Whitesell acknowledged, it's fun.

"The crazier, the more mechanical, the better. This is right up my alley. As soon as I got into this field, one of the nice things about being in this division, we have a lot of things like this we operate in some extreme environments," he said.

Those include fire boats on the lakes and rivers and all-terrain vehicles for the mountains and deserts. Whitesell has operated all of them.

"When you look at what we're exposed to and what we're forced to deal with, when we are working in the 120-degree heat of the Mojave National Preserve, the Joshua Tree National Monument, the subzero snow-to-your eyeballs of the mountains," Sherwin said, "you have to have a fleet that's designed to support those very terrains."

<https://www.sbsun.com/2023/03/11/to-rescue-mountain-residents-san-bernardino-countys-snowcats-create-their-own-roads/>

San Bernardino mountain residents still under siege are outraged highways were reopened to visitors

By Josh Cain & Brian Rokos, SB SUN

March 12, 2023



A shopper walks past piles of snow in the upper parking lot of Lake Arrowhead Village after record-breaking snow in recent weeks in the San Bernardino Mountains and Lake Arrowhead on Saturday, March 11, 2023.

The Caltrans post came like a victory announcement: After weeks of closures, state highways running through [isolated, snowed-in communities of the San Bernardino Mountains](#) would finally reopen at 10 p.m. on Saturday, March 11.

Workers in snowplows had finally cleared most major routes — photos of highways showed asphalt clean of ice and snow, surely a sight that would give some living in these hard-hit mountain areas relief.

“At this time, all mountain routes will reopen, to all,” officials wrote. That meant, except for some areas where limited closures would remain, highways 18, 138, and 330 would reopen Saturday night.

Still, California’s state transportation agency warned anyone driving into the area from out of town that the recovery process was still very much underway.

“Nonresidents, please be aware that the community is still recovering. Be respectful, slow down, and do not park on the roadways blocking essential personnel trying to render help,” Caltrans wrote. “Please bring chains with you, as weather conditions can change rapidly. Be prepared for long traffic queues, as you could be waiting for some time.”

Then the comments flooded in.

Hundreds of local residents took to the Caltrans Facebook post to criticize the reopening of routes to their towns, which they said were still under siege from piled-up snow.

“Way to make it clear that you have no idea the reality of what is happening up here,” said one local.

“Terrible idea!!” said another. “People are still trapped in their homes, structures are still collapsing, there is no parking, we’re down to one grocery store. We still have way too much snow. This is not the time to come play.”

They said access to critical supplies was still difficult — winding, one-way roads hemmed in by walls of snow meant just driving through their communities for routine tasks was still enormously treacherous. Numerous residents whose cars were still trapped under feet of snow have been forced to walk to buy food, meaning many had to walk in the street as vehicles sped near them.

By Sunday afternoon, some said, drivers who appeared unfamiliar with the area arrived in their communities, adding to the chaos.

Devina Horvath has lived in Crestline since 2019. The environmental consultant had been snowed in with her husband, children and their clutch of dogs and chickens for days before they were finally plowed out. Her town is the first major stop for anyone headed up State Route 18 into the San Bernardino Mountains and west into Lake Arrowhead or Big Bear Lake.

She said she was driving to help an elderly neighbor in her 90s who needed food for her cats when she noticed more drivers in town.

“There’s been an increase in traffic in the middle of Crestline,” Horvath said.

“Everybody is still recovering up here, but I’m seeing drivers turning in weird places, stopping in the middle of the road. Or they’ve stopped because they don’t realize the street they’re on is a two-way. You can tell it’s somebody who’s not from here.”

She said one of those drivers nearly hit her after blowing through a stop sign. The dangerous driving made her nervous, not just for herself, but for the residents who now have to walk Crestline’s narrow, icy streets.

It’s not clear from officials whether there really has been an influx of drivers into Crestline and other mountain towns. And it’s also not clear why Caltrans opened the routes to these communities to all drivers, not just locals with identification or families trying to reach their trapped loved ones. Officials in Caltrans District 8 did not respond to a request for comment Sunday.

Residents, however, said they were concerned officials were bowing to demands from the area’s ski resorts and other businesses [to finally allow visitors up](#) to experience what could be once-in-a-lifetime slopes.

On March 9, Eric Sherwin of the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department and a spokesman for the county’s snow recovery effort acknowledged that there was a push to get some of the area’s important resorts open. But he said the county would not put allowing visitors up in front of public safety.

“The pressure we are getting from the resorts is steady and continual and we absolutely want to welcome visitors to resorts. We know we are going to experience (skiing etc.) conditions we haven’t seen in years,” Sherwin said. “(But) It would be irresponsible for us to open the communities to non-residents before we could safely provide for the residents who live here.”

Justin Kanton, a spokesman for Big Bear Mountain Resort, said the resort was not putting pressure on officials to reopen the area. He noted that with restaurants and motels closed, there’d be few places for visitors to eat and stay once they get here. San Bernardino County Sheriff Shannon Dicus said the resorts have been “good partners” in the recovery effort.

Still, the apparent lack of communication over their local highways being reopened left residents with questions about who Caltrans was allowing to come up to their communities.

“People’s porches are still collapsing,” Horvath said. “If we were in a hurricane zone or a place where a tornado had blown through, they wouldn’t be letting people come up if they weren’t residents or workers.”

“It’s a disaster up here,” she said. People are stuck still — I just can’t fathom being like, ‘Come and play in the snow.’”

<https://www.sbsun.com/2023/03/12/san-bernardino-mountain-residents-still-under-siege-are-outraged-highways-were-reopened-to-visitors/>

One person airlifted after Saturday morning crash at Phelan and Sheep Creek Roads

By Staff Writer, VICTOR VALLEY NEWS

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PHELAN, Calif. (VVNG.com) — One person was airlifted and two others were transported to a local hospital after a Saturday morning crash in the community of Phelan.

It happened at about 7:06 am, on Saturday, March 11, 2023, at the intersection of Phelan Road and Sheep Creek Road.

San Bernardino County Fire responded to the incident and upon arrival, they located a white Jeep SUV in the intersection with major front-end damage and a gray pickup truck in the landscaping of the nearby gas station also with major damage to the passenger side.

Firefighters reported they had a total of three people injured with one of them requiring minor extrication. Several additional ground ambulances and an airship were requested to respond.

The driver of the truck was extricated and transported by ambulance to the nearby landing zone.

Mercy Air 22 landed in a dirt lot of the Stater Bros. shopping center and transported the injured to Antelope Valley Hospital. The other two patients were transported locally by ground ambulance.

The cause of the accident is under investigation by the California Highway Patrol Victorville Station.

<https://www.vvng.com/driver-airlifted-after-saturday-morning-crash-at-phelan-and-sheep-creek-roads/>