



SHORT-TERM SOLUTION



PHIL DRAKE PHOTOS, INDEPENDENT RECORD

Travelers heading west can take the road to the right to access the old bridge, and heavy loads can go to the left for the new temporary bridge. These photos were taken before gates were installed.

Birdtail Road now has two bridges, including temporary one

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Apparently it was not a case of a bridge too far.

Lewis and Clark County found a temporary solution nearly 250 miles away in Idaho for a bridge needed on Birdtail Road northeast of Helena, which officials say solves the problem for now until funding can be found for a permanent structure.

There are now two bridges at the site over Flat Creek on Birdtail Road, located nearly 3.8 miles north from U.S. Highway 287 and about 18 miles from Wolf Creek near the Cascade County line. The original bridge, built in 1901, is under a 5-ton weight-limit restriction and will handle single-vehicle traffic, and the temporary bridge will take care of heavy loads. There are now concrete dividers along the roadway, creating a serpentine entry to the original bridge.

Lewis and Clark County enacted the weight limit on Nov. 1 following a Montana Department of Transportation inspection. The weight limit restrictions caused hardship for ranchers and others using heavy machinery, who said the detour would force them to drive miles out of their way. Some also noted the restrictions prevent emergency vehicles from crossing.

The new temporary bridge is for agricultural traffic over 5 tons.

Lewis and Clark County bought a used steel-construction TrueNorth bridge built in 2018 from the city of Wallace,



The new temporary bridge alongside Birdtail Road as seen from the existing bridge. These photos were taken before gates were installed.

Idaho. It purchased the 50-foot-by-16-foot bridge for \$50,000, which was below the estimated cost of \$90,000, county officials said. They do not have a final cost for moving the bridge at this time.

The county entered into a five-year temporary construction agreement with the Dearborn Ranch to install the bridge, county officials said. They said it is gated

(not locked) and signed with “Keep Gate Closed” at the request of the landowner to protect private property and livestock. Light-passenger vehicle traffic should continue to use the original bridge.

Installation began July 21 and was completed Aug. 18.

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Department of Interior mulling opening up public lands



BOB WICK, U.S. BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

The 3,600 acres added to public lands by a recent collaboration include about two miles of Seymour Creek and its riparian habitat.

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The Department of the Interior is proposing to quit the public land conservation rule finalized last year under the Biden administration and then legally challenged by Montana.

With the removal of the rule, the agency intends to open up public lands across the nation for mostly industry interests like energy development and agriculture.

The government’s move was praised by Republicans and industry groups, while environmentalists said it would threaten wildlife, hunting and public access.

“The harmful Public Lands Rule would have blocked access to use of public lands for outdoor recreation and also would have restricted energy production, grazing and forest management,” Sen. Steve Daines said in a statement. “By rescinding the Public Lands Rule and unlocking more timber sales

in Montana, we’ll be better able to manage our forests and prevent catastrophic wildfires.”

The Conservation and Landscape Health Rule, informally known as the Public Lands Rule, intends to help safeguard the health of public lands by defining conservation as an official use of public lands on equal footing with other activities like grazing or drilling. The Bureau of Land Management oversees roughly 8 million acres in Montana.

For more than two years, politicians, environmental groups and industry interests deliberated over whether the rule would lock up lands or protect and restore lands in a changing climate. Roughly 80% of BLM land is open to oil and gas development, something environmental groups believe comes at the expense of public access and conservation.

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