

2026

THE IMPACT OF I-70

CONGESTION ON COLORADO

Denver to Grand Junction



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Acknowledgements

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- Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT)
- I-70 Coalition
- Northwest Colorado Council of Governments (NWCCOG)
- Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG)
- Colorado Tourism Office
- Colorado Ski Country USA
- Vail Resorts, Inc.
- Vail Valley Partnership



Executive Summary

Interstate 70 is Colorado’s most critical east–west transportation corridor, serving as the primary connection between Metro Denver, the Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope. It functions simultaneously as a commuter route, a freight artery, and the backbone of the state’s tourism and outdoor recreation economy. Over the past four decades, the State of Colorado has invested heavily in safety, environmental stewardship, and targeted capacity improvements along the corridor, including the Glenwood Canyon reconstruction, upgrades to the Eisenhower–Johnson Memorial Tunnel, and the addition of Peak Period Shoulder Lanes—often referred to as express lanes—which operate only during limited days and peak travel periods. Other major projects are also underway, including Floyd Hill and West Vail Pass. Despite these investments, travel demand has continued to grow faster than available capacity, resulting in persistent and worsening congestion. This study evaluates the economic, workforce, quality-of-life, and public-sector impacts of continued congestion along I-70 under a scenario in which no additional major capacity or operational improvements are implemented. The analysis does not evaluate or recommend specific expansion alternatives. Instead, it quantifies and documents the costs of inaction if existing congestion trends persist and intensify over time.

Key Findings

- I-70 is a critical transportation corridor for Colorado, but growing traffic volumes, seasonal travel patterns, and weather-related disruptions have pushed demand beyond capacity, resulting in recurring congestion. **Continued population growth and increased travel demand are expected to further intensify congestion, leading to longer delays, reduced reliability, and greater strain on the corridor through 2050.**
- Tourism is a major driver of Colorado's economy, supporting businesses, jobs, and local tax revenues. However, increasing congestion along the I-70 corridor threatens this economic activity, as even **a 1% decline in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region would result in an estimated annual loss of approximately \$47 million in tourism-related economic activity.**
- Mountain Resort Region businesses conduct an average of **\$2.3 million** in tourism-related transactions each workday hour. If I-70 congestion disrupts regular visitor flow into the region, total tourism-related revenue will decline accordingly.
- Workforce and housing pressures along the I-70 mountain corridor are amplified by congestion. High housing costs, second-home ownership, and short-term rentals already require many workers to commute long distances, and congestion further increases travel times and unreliability. **Valuing only the personal time lost due to congestion along the I-70 mountain corridor, the cost of congestion is currently \$319 million annually.**
- I-70 congestion increases costs for businesses by reducing productivity, complicating employee recruitment and retention, and raising wages and operating expenses, particularly in mountain communities with long commuter patterns. **If worker productivity and business efficiency decline by just 0.5% due to congestion-related factors, Colorado's GDP would decrease by nearly \$1.9 billion annually.**
- Freight movement along the I-70 Mountain Corridor is essential to Colorado's economy, but congestion can lead to increased shipping costs, delayed deliveries, and added operational challenges for trucking and local businesses. Congestion-related truck delays contribute to an estimated \$14 million increase in added shipping costs annually, including **approximately \$2 million in direct cost impacts to local mountain businesses.**
- I-70 congestion can lead to increased local government costs by placing additional strain on emergency services, infrastructure, and workforce housing programs, while also making it more difficult for local governments to recruit and retain employees. At the same time, it threatens key revenue sources if tourism activity is impacted, as **even a 1% decline in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region would reduce state and local sales tax revenue by approximately \$2.3 million annually.**

Summary of the Impact of I-70 Congestion

Sector Impacted	Key Assumptions	(\$ million, 2025)
Tourism	1% decrease in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region	\$47
Resident	Value of time lost due to congestion based on impacted travelers in Metro Denver, Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope	\$319
Business	0.5% loss of productivity and business efficiency in Metro Denver, Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope	\$1,882
Government	Loss of state, county, and city retail sales tax revenue associated with 1% decrease in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region	\$2
Total Impacts		\$2,250

- Delaying improvements along the I-70 Mountain Corridor comes at a growing cost, with capital estimates rising to an estimated **\$30 billion** in 2025 while annual maintenance costs reach \$44 million or more. Each year of inaction compounds these costs, increasing the long-term financial burden on taxpayers and the overall cost of congestion.
- **Extreme weather events and changing climate** conditions increasingly disrupt travel along I-70, causing closures, delays, and safety risks that strain transportation infrastructure and alter travel patterns. Both severe events such as wildfires and floods and longer-term shifts like low-snow years contribute to more volatile and concentrated travel demand, making reliable year-round access along the corridor increasingly critical.
- **Housing dynamics** in the Mountain Resort Region are heavily shaped by second homes and short-term rentals, which limit workforce housing availability, drive up prices, and force longer commutes that increase congestion along I-70. These interconnected pressures reinforce a feedback loop between housing, travel demand, and tourism, where rising costs and reduced accessibility strain both the workforce and the long-term sustainability of mountain communities.
- **Closures along I-70 frequently divert traffic onto secondary routes that are not designed for high volumes**, resulting in longer travel times, increased safety risks, and added strain on local infrastructure and communities. While these diversions can generate short-term economic activity in affected towns, they also create significant disruptions, including localized gridlock, freight delays, and increased public service demands.

Introduction

Traffic volumes along I-70 have increased steadily over the past two decades and are projected to continue rising through 2050, though year-to-year volumes have fluctuated and some segments, including Idaho Springs, have experienced periods of flat or declining growth since 2015. Key choke points, including the Eisenhower–Johnson Memorial Tunnel, Idaho Springs, and Glenwood Springs, already experience traffic levels that approach or exceed design capacity.

Congestion along I-70 has consequences that extend well beyond travel inconvenience. It reduces productivity, increases household and business costs, disrupts freight movement, strains emergency services, and introduces economic uncertainty for communities that rely heavily on tourism.

As mountain corridor congestion persists, it increasingly acts as a structural factor shaping economic and social conditions across Colorado. In mountain communities, congestion interacts with workforce housing constraints and seasonal tourism demand to intensify commuting challenges for the region’s workforce. For Metro Denver and the Western Slope, unreliable travel conditions influence travel behavior, raise business operating costs, and reduce economic productivity, while also limiting reliable access between Front Range population centers and Western Slope markets.

Study Scope and Methodology

This study updates the original *Impact of I-70 Congestion on Colorado*, completed in 2007 by Development Research Partners. The objective of the update is to maintain the analytical framework of the original study while incorporating current economic conditions, travel behavior, and emerging environmental and operational challenges.

The analysis begins with an assessment of baseline traffic conditions along the I-70 corridor, including travel volumes, peak travel periods, and seasonal travel patterns. Building on this baseline, the study evaluates congestion impacts under a scenario in which no major capacity expansions or operational improvements are implemented. Impacts are assessed across five categories:

- **Tourism:** Evaluates how congestion affects visitation patterns, travel behavior, and recreation spending across winter and summer seasons.
- **Residential Market and Workforce:** Examines impacts on commuting patterns, workforce accessibility, and housing market dynamics.

- **Business Community:** Assesses impacts on labor availability, freight reliability, and business operating costs.
- **Government:** Evaluates public-sector costs related to emergency services, transportation operations, and infrastructure demands.
- **Construction and Infrastructure Costs:** Examines the financial implications of deferring major improvements, including escalating construction costs associated with delay.

Consistent with the 2007 study, congestion-related impacts are evaluated across three regions:

- **Metro Denver**, where congestion affects leisure travel, goods movement, and regional economic efficiency.
- **Mountain Resort Region**, where congestion influences tourism demand, employee access, housing affordability, and seasonal economic activity.
- **Western Slope**, where reliable access to Front Range markets is essential for business operations, workforce mobility, and economic stability.

Both quantitative and qualitative impacts are assessed. Quantitative impacts are expressed in 2025 dollars and include productivity losses, wasted wages, increased vehicle operating costs, freight delays, foregone tourism revenue, and rising infrastructure and maintenance costs. Qualitative impacts include workforce accessibility challenges, visitor perceptions, business risks, and broader quality-of-life considerations.

While the core analytical framework remains consistent with the 2007 report, this update expands the analysis to reflect emerging challenges such as COVID impacts, workforce housing constraints, increased reliance on short-term rentals, and greater exposure to wildfire and extreme weather disruptions. These considerations are incorporated throughout the report and discussed in greater detail in the **Beyond the Numbers** section. A comparison between the 2007 and 2026 reports also highlights how congestion-related impacts have evolved over time.



History of the I-70 Corridor in Colorado

As the primary east–west transportation route through the Rocky Mountains, I-70 connects Metro Denver with mountain communities and major recreation destinations. Since the 1980s, Colorado has undertaken a series of major projects to improve safety, mobility, and environmental protection along the I-70 Mountain Corridor.

Despite these ongoing investments, population growth, tourism activity, freight volumes, and environmental factors continue to place pressure on the corridor, contributing to persistent congestion, particularly during peak travel periods.

Key I-70 Mountain Corridor Milestones: 1980s-2020s

1980s–1990s: Foundational Construction and Environmental Design

- Planning and construction of the Glenwood Canyon Project, completed in 1992, which incorporated elevated roadways, tunnels, and environmentally sensitive design to protect the Colorado River corridor.
- Safety and ventilation upgrades at the Eisenhower–Johnson Memorial Tunnels.
- Early traffic management systems introduced as tourism and freight travel increased.

2000s: Corridor Planning and Capacity Improvements

- Interchange upgrades and lane improvements near Vail, Silverthorne, and Idaho Springs to address growing traffic volumes.
- Development of CDOT’s I-70 Mountain Corridor Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) to guide long-term transportation planning.

2010s: Traffic Management and Express Lanes

- Completion of the Twin Tunnels widening near Idaho Springs (2013–2014).
- Opening of the I-70 Mountain Express Lane (2015), a Peak Period Shoulder Lane that uses dynamic tolling and operates only during limited peak-travel periods to manage congestion.
- Implementation of improved traveler information systems and real-time weather monitoring.

2020s: Corridor Modernization

- Construction of the Floyd Hill Project (beginning in 2023) to add a third lane and improve safety east of the Eisenhower Tunnel.
- West Vail Pass auxiliary lanes project to improve safety and traffic operations.
- Ongoing repairs and modernization of the Eisenhower–Johnson Memorial Tunnel infrastructure and continued expansion of corridor safety and environmental

Colorado Legislative Actions

Over the past decade, the Colorado General Assembly has enacted a series of policies aimed at improving transportation funding, safety, and operational reliability along major highway corridors, including I-70. These measures reflect growing recognition of the corridor's importance to Colorado's economy, tourism industry, and statewide mobility. Legislative actions have focused on expanding long-term transportation funding, accelerating major infrastructure projects, strengthening winter safety requirements, and improving enforcement of managed lanes and commercial vehicle regulations. The intention of the majority of these policies has been to enhance travel reliability, reduce crash risk, and support more efficient movement of both travelers and freight along the I-70 Mountain Corridor.

Legislative Action Affecting I-70 Flow 2016- Present

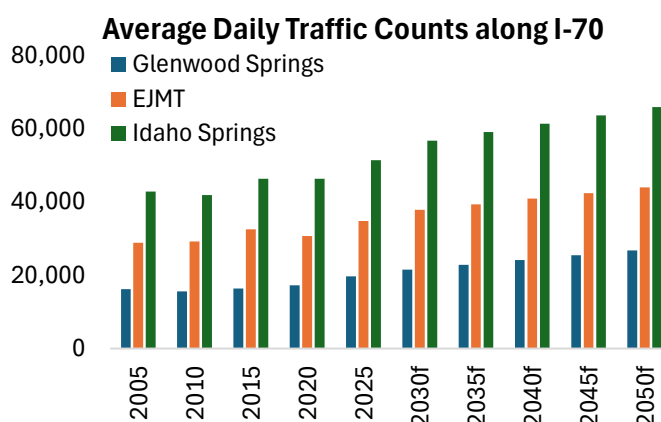
Year	Bill	Description/Purpose of Bill/Impact on I-70
2017	HB17-1242	Required submission of a statewide ballot measure to raise transportation revenue. While not I-70-specific, the bill sought to increase funding for statewide highway capacity, maintenance, and congestion relief, including major interstate corridors such as I-70. The effort highlighted the growing need for long-term funding solutions.
2017	SB17-267	Authorized CDOT to use lease-purchase financing for high-priority transportation projects. This mechanism increased flexibility to accelerate large, capital-intensive projects, including improvements on major highway corridors like I-70.
2018	SB18-001	Established recurring General Fund transfers to transportation funds, including the State Highway Fund and Highway Users Tax Fund. These transfers provided additional resources for highway maintenance, resurfacing, bridge repair, and operational improvements.
2021	SB21-260	Created a long-term, dedicated funding stream for transportation, generating more than \$5 billion over 10 years. The law enabled CDOT to advance major corridor projects, including I-70 capacity, safety, and operational improvements such as Floyd Hill planning, tunnel work, and mountain corridor reliability investments.
2022	HB22-1074	Clarified and strengthened enforcement of peak-period shoulder lanes and express lane use on I-70. The bill established civil penalties for improper use, helping ensure these managed lanes function as intended to relieve congestion and improve travel time reliability during high-traffic periods.
2024	SB24-100	Strengthened the commercial vehicle chain law and winter safety enforcement on I-70 and other mountain corridors. The bill expanded requirements for Commercial Motor Vehicles (CMVs) to carry chains from Sept. 1 to May 31 on major mountain corridors (I-70, US-50, US-285, etc.) and introduced stricter Passenger Vehicle Traction Laws (AWD/4WD with proper tires or chains) on the I-70 Mountain Corridor. The bill increased penalties, restricted commercial vehicles from using left lanes except when passing, and enhanced speed enforcement.
2025	SB25-069	Created a permit system for third-party vendors to sell and install chains at designated sites.
2025	SB25-320	Updated commercial motor vehicle statutes to improve regulatory clarity and freight movement consistency. While not I-70-specific, the bill supports smoother freight operations on key corridors like I-70, complementing chain-law enforcement and winter traffic reliability efforts.

Base Traffic Conditions

I-70 is the primary east-west thoroughfare in Colorado, serving as a crucial transportation corridor for both passenger and commercial traffic connecting Denver to the Rocky Mountains and beyond. I-70 runs through the Rocky Mountains over several mountain passes, including the highest point of the U.S. Interstate System at the west portal of the Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnel (EJMT). I-70 also provides access to numerous mountain communities via smaller highways that branch off the interstate. Because of its location, I-70 in the Mountain Corridor is prone to avalanches and rockslides and is occasionally closed due to adverse weather conditions and traffic accidents. These factors, combined with high traffic volumes and existing roadways' safety and operational constraints, contribute to the need for ongoing road maintenance and construction activity.

Congestion Trends

Use of the I-70 Mountain Corridor is heavily influenced by visitor travel due to the region's concentration of outdoor recreation destinations, while residents and freight traffic also rely on the corridor year-round. Although overall traffic volumes are typically higher in summer, the most severe congestion occurs during winter peak periods, when a combination of concentrated ski travel and winter weather conditions affect roadway operations.

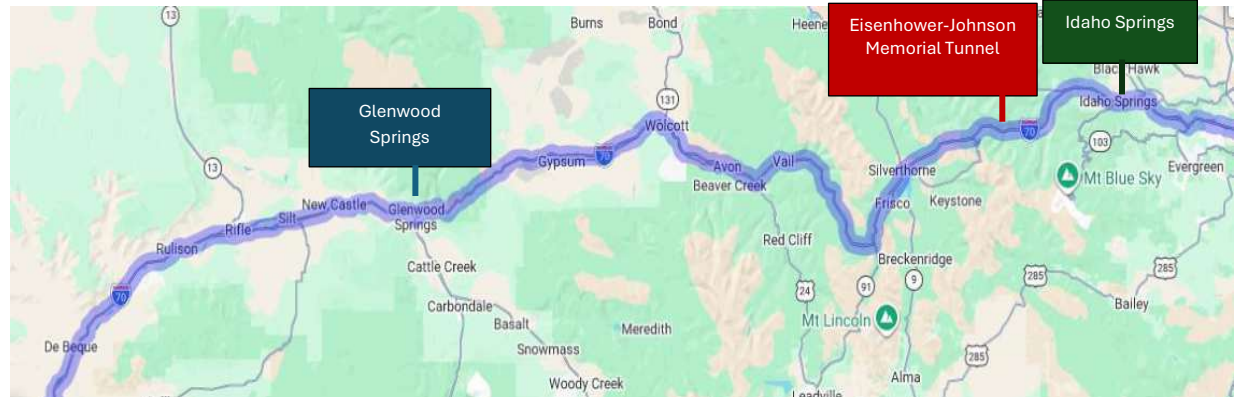


Source: CDOT, OTIS.

Traffic volumes along I-70 are expected to continue growing, reflecting ongoing population growth across Colorado as well as the Mountain Corridor's continued popularity as a recreation and tourism destination. While long-term demand has grown, traffic volumes have not increased steadily every year. CDOT counts show year-to-year fluctuations, and locations such as Idaho Springs have experienced periods of flat or declining volumes since 2015. Capacity along I-70 throughout the Mountain Resort Region varies by location and is influenced by weather conditions, seasonality, travel patterns, and roadway conditions. Both existing and projected travel demands along the Corridor exceed the highway's design capacity, contributing to recurring congestion and increasing demands on roadway maintenance and operations¹.

¹ CDOT PEIS 2011.

This report identifies three key monitoring locations to measure traffic conditions along the I-70 Mountain Corridor: Idaho Springs, the Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnel, and Glenwood Springs. These locations also serve to highlight differences in traffic volumes near Metro Denver, within the Mountain Resort Region, and near the Western Slope. While traffic volumes are highest near Metro Denver, the fastest growth in traffic has occurred in the Western Slope.



Location	Corridor Segment Represented	2025 Average Daily Traffic	Change Since 2015	Change Since 2005	Avg. Annual Growth (2015-2025)
Idaho Springs (Twin Tunnels)	Metro Denver	51,000 vehicles	+10.9%	+19.9%	1.0%
Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnel (EJMT)	Mountain Resort Region	34,000 vehicles	+7.0%	+20.6%	0.7%
Glenwood Springs	Western Slope	19,000 vehicles	+20.7%	+22.1%	1.9%

Source: CDOT.

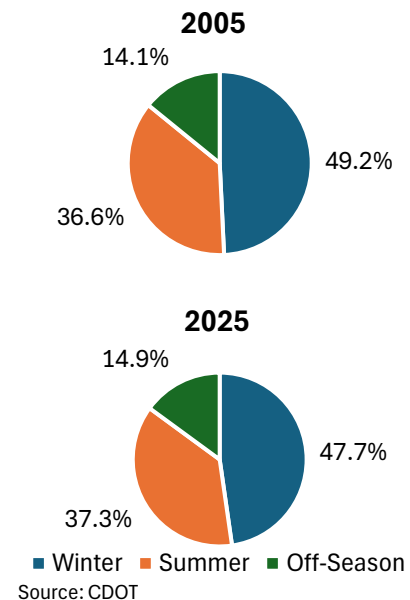
Seasonal Traffic Trends

Winter Season

Winter traffic along the I-70 Mountain Corridor occurs primarily between November and April, with peak congestion around holidays, school breaks, and weekends in January and February, coinciding with the ski season. Travel during the winter months is frequently affected by weather conditions and periodic construction activity along the corridor.

In 2025, combined eastbound and westbound winter traffic totaled 6 million, an increase of 12.7% or nearly 1 million additional vehicles on the road compared to 2005 levels. Despite this increase, winter traffic accounted for a slightly smaller share of total annual traffic, making up 47.7% of all traffic compared to 49.2% in 2005.

**Share of Combined
Westbound & Eastbound
I-70 Traffic**



Summer Season

Summer travel along the I-70 mountain corridor occurs between June and September and increases significantly during holiday weekends such as July 4th. Summer traffic has grown substantially over the past two decades, particularly during peak travel weekends and periods of high temperatures along the Front Range, as residents head to the mountains to seek cooler conditions at higher elevations.

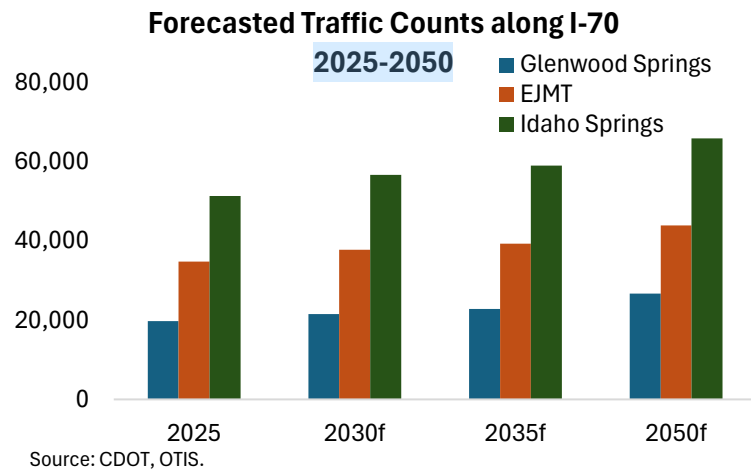
In 2025, the combined eastbound and westbound summer traffic totaled 4.7 million vehicles, an increase of 18.5% compared to 2005, or an average annual increase of 700,000 vehicles. As such, the total share of annual traffic occurring in the summer increased from 36.6% in 2005 to 37.3% in 2025. Summer traffic is also influenced by seasonally scheduled maintenance and construction activity along the corridor, further adding to congestion.

Shoulder Seasons

While traffic volumes during the shoulder seasons (May and October) are generally lower than during the peak summer and winter periods, shoulder season traffic has increased substantially over the last two decades. In 2025, the combined eastbound and westbound shoulder-season traffic totaled 1.9 million vehicle trips, or about 30,000 vehicles per day. Between 2005 and 2025, shoulder-season traffic increased by 22.9%, representing nearly 400,000 additional vehicles over the two-month period.

Traffic Congestion Forecast

Traffic volumes along I-70 are projected to continue increasing over the next 25 years, with the rate of increase gradually slowing over time and varying by location. Between 2025 and 2030, traffic at the EJMT is expected to rise by 8.7%, while Idaho Springs and Glenwood Springs are expected to experience faster near-term growth due to more notable overlap of local and through



traffic. By 2050, Glenwood Springs is projected to experience the largest cumulative increase in traffic (+35.5%), followed by Idaho Springs (+28.3%) and the EJMT (26.3%).

Traffic Counts 2025-2050

Geography	2025	2030	2035	2050	%ch.	%ch.	%ch.
					2025-2030	2025-2035	2025-2050
Idaho Springs	51,377	56,754	59,049	65,934	10.5%	14.9%	28.3%
EJMT	34,802	37,836	39,366	43,956	8.7%	13.1%	26.3%
Glenwood Springs	19,744	21,560	22,860	26,760	9.2%	15.8%	35.5%

Source: CDOT.

According to DRCOG's travel demand model, vehicle miles traveled in the region are projected to increase by about 40% through 2050. Under these conditions, substantial increases in congestion-related outcomes are expected, including growth in total vehicle hours of delay and the number of roadway segments experiencing prolonged daytime congestion.²

Statewide demographic trends further reinforce this outlook. Colorado's population is projected to grow by more than a million residents by 2050, with a substantial share of that growth occurring along the Colorado Front Range.³ Because I-70 serves as the primary east-west connection between the Front Range and the western half of the state, population growth is expected to generate additional travel demand along the I-70 mountain corridor.

² Denver Regional Council of Governments. (2025, January 13). *2023 annual report on roadway traffic congestion in the Denver region*. <https://www.drcog.org/news/drcog-releases-2023-annual-report-roadway-traffic-congestion>.

³ State Demography Office, Colorado Department of Local Affairs.

Peak Travel Periods

Congestion along I-70 occurs year-round but is most severe during predictable daily, weekly, and seasonal peak travel periods. Recreational travel is the primary driver of these peaks, particularly during summer and winter weekends and major holidays.

Peak Travel Periods		
Westbound Congestion		
	Summer	Winter
Friday	1:00 pm-5:30 pm	2:00 pm-7:00 pm
Saturday	Minor traffic patterns; no major delays	6:00 am-12:00 pm
Sunday	12:00 pm-5:00 pm	7:00 am – 10:30 am
Eastbound Congestion		
	Summer	Winter
Friday	Minor traffic patterns; no major delays	2:00 pm – 4:00 pm
Saturday	Minor traffic patterns; no major delays	2:00 pm – 5:00 pm
Sunday	11:00 am – 7:00 pm	11:30 am – 8:00 pm

Source: CDOT, Go I-70.

Overall traffic volumes tend to be higher in summer than in winter on both weekdays and weekends. Although winter congestion can feel more severe due to weather, crashes, and periodic closures, summer outdoor recreation generates higher total vehicle volumes. For example, traffic at the Eisenhower–Johnson Memorial Tunnel on a typical summer weekend day is about 45% higher than in winter and roughly 15% higher on weekdays.

For travel between Metro Denver and the Mountain Resort Region, peak congestion typically occurs westbound on Friday afternoons and evenings and eastbound on Sunday afternoons and evenings, corresponding with the start and end of weekend recreation trips. Summer peaks generally occur between June and August and intensify around major holidays such as Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Labor Day. Winter peak travel is most pronounced between January and March and increases during holidays, school breaks, and ski season weekends.

Congestion patterns between the Western Slope and the Mountain Resort Region follow similar dynamics but with westbound and eastbound congestion periods generally reversed. While congestion originating from the Western Slope is typically less severe than congestion between Metro Denver and the Mountain Resort Region, peak travel periods still result in notable delays and reduced travel reliability.

Without major operational or capacity improvements, peak-period congestion is expected to intensify, resulting in longer travel times, reduced mobility, and shifts in travel behavior as some trips are delayed, shortened, or avoided altogether.

Tourism Impact

Tourism is one of Colorado's largest industries. Longwoods International estimates that 95.4 million visitors generated \$29.5 billion in total expenditures in Colorado in 2024, and the Colorado tourism industry supported over 470,000 direct and indirect travel-related jobs across the state. This visitor spending represents a critical source of revenue for local businesses and communities along the corridor. Approximately \$4.7 billion in visitor spending was spent in the Mountain Resort Region in 2024, and \$780 million was spent on the Western Slope.¹ If congestion along the I-70 corridor worsens, a portion of this economic impact is at risk. **A 1% decline in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region would result in an estimated annual loss of approximately \$47 million.**

Every \$1 million in travel-related spending in Colorado supported approximately seven jobs in the tourism industry.

-Colorado Business Economic Outlook, 2026.

Recreational Activities

Outdoor recreation plays a major role in Colorado's tourism economy, with roughly 96% of Colorado residents engaging in outdoor recreational activities annually.² In 2023, the outdoor recreation industry generated \$65.8 billion in total economic output and contributed \$36.5 billion to Colorado's economy, or approximately 12% of the state's GDP.² Colorado's ski industry is a major driver of the state's outdoor recreation tourism, and the state remains the nation's leading destination for skiing, capturing about 22–23% of total U.S. skier visits.³ The state is also a major destination for other adventure sports, including mountain biking, rafting, rock climbing, hiking, and more.

Recreational travel to and through the Mountain Resort Region contributes significantly to traffic congestion along the I-70 corridor throughout the year. The impacts are most pronounced during winter weekends, when travel to ski resorts is concentrated within narrow time windows and directed toward a limited number of destinations.

¹ Dean Runyan Associates, "The Economic Impact of Travel in Colorado 2024," 2025.

² State of Colorado, "Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2025-2029," 2024.

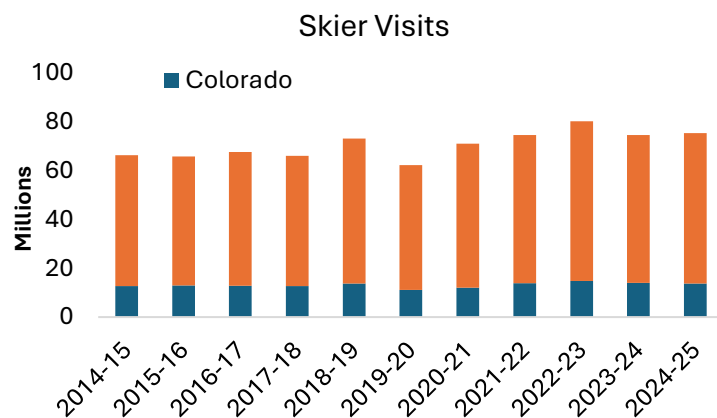
³ Colorado Ski Country USA, National Ski Areas Association.

Winter (November–April)

Winter travelers to Colorado enjoy a broad array of recreational activities, with snow activities contributing \$18.1 billion, or 3.3% of the state’s GDP in 2024.⁴ Within the Mountain Resort Region, visitors may ski or snowboard at 22 major resorts, explore hundreds of miles of backcountry trails on snowshoes or Nordic skis, try ice fishing, or participate in cultural events hosted by the region’s mountain communities.

Over the past two decades, travel patterns to Colorado’s ski resorts have evolved. The growth in multi-resort ski passes has encouraged visitors to travel more frequently and visit more destinations per trip, while international visitation, which is typically associated with longer stays and higher per-person spending, has fluctuated with broader global travel conditions. These shifting trends have added to the importance of reliable travel across the entire I-70 corridor.

Colorado hosted approximately 13.8 million skier visits during the 2024–25 winter season, the third-busiest season on record.⁵ Of the state’s 28 ski resorts, 17 are directly accessible via I-70, making the corridor a critical gateway to the state’s ski industry. Despite a modest slowdown in recent years after reaching a record 14.8 million visits during the 2022–23 season, skier visits increased 8.7% over the past decade.



Source: Colorado Ski Country USA; National Ski Areas

Resorts along the I-70 corridor rank among the most visited in the United States, drawing millions of out-of-state visitors each year, with overnight ski trips to Colorado most frequently originating from Colorado, Texas, and California.⁶ Colorado leads the nation in ski market share, making up 22.4% of all ski visits in 2025.⁷

⁴ Bureau of Economic Analysis, Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics, 2024.

⁵ Colorado Tourism Office, Colorado Ski Country USA.

⁶ Longwoods International.

⁷ National Ski Area Association, Kottke National End of Season Survey.

Three of the five most visited ski resorts in the United States in 2024, Breckenridge, Vail Mountain, and Keystone, are located along the I-70 corridor.⁸ While skier visits dipped slightly year-over-year, taxable sales across eight mountain resort communities (Aspen, Breckenridge, Frisco, Snowmass Village, Steamboat Springs, Telluride, Vail, and Winter Park) increased modestly (+0.7%) during the 2024–25 winter season, following growth of 4.8% in 2022–23 and 2.1% in 2023–24. Since the pre-COVID 2018–19 winter season, taxable sales in these communities have increased 61%, while statewide taxable sales increased 42%.

Summer (June–September)

Colorado is also a major destination for summer recreation, with a large share of visitor trips occurring during the summer months. The White River and Arapaho–Roosevelt National Forests are among the most visited in the United States and Colorado ranked 12th nationally in national park acreage, encompassing approximately 740,000 acres, and welcoming more than 7.2 million national park visitors in 2024.⁹

Colorado’s heritage tourism sector is a major driver of summer visitation, drawing travelers to historic mining towns, cultural sites, and scenic byways that highlight the state’s frontier and railroad history. Heritage and cultural tourism generate \$10.5 billion in direct spending and support 79,000 jobs statewide, with 44 million heritage tourists contributing \$650 million in state and local tax revenue.¹⁰ Scenic and historic byways add further impact, producing \$800 million in annual visitor spending.¹¹ Together, these heritage assets underscore the importance of cultural and historic attractions as a vital complement to Colorado’s outdoor recreation economy.

Colorado is also home to 54 mountain peaks exceeding 14,000 feet, commonly known as “fourteeners,” which attract both residents and visitors. Twelve of these peaks are located within the Mountain Resort Region. Summer visitors also traveled to the region to participate in activities such as fishing, biking, rafting, kayaking, camping, and rock climbing.

⁸ Powder Magazine.

⁹ National Park Service 6/30/2025 Acreage Report, National Park Service Visitation Numbers.

¹⁰ History Colorado, Archaeology for a Changing Colorado, “Historic Preservation for a Changing Colorado,” 2019.

¹¹ Scenic America, National Scenic Byways Program: Colorado, 2023.

While much of Colorado’s available recreation options involve nonmotorized activities such as hiking and cycling, motorized recreation, such as off-highway vehicle use and four-wheeling, brings in meaningful economic impact, particularly in the Western Slope economy. Across the state, motorized recreation enthusiasts spend an estimated \$2.4 billion annually while taking trips using motorized vehicles for recreational purposes, with more than 92% of these expenditures occurring during the summer months.¹²

Water-based recreation is also an important contributor to the state’s tourism economy, with Colorado’s rafting industry generating nearly \$210 million in economic impact in 2024.¹³ Several of the state’s most popular river sections are located along the I-70 corridor, including Clear Creek and the Colorado River through Glenwood Canyon, which rank second and third statewide, respectively, for the highest number of record user days.

Year-Round Tourism

While Colorado is widely recognized for its seasonal recreational opportunities, the state also offers a variety of year-round entertainment and outdoor activities for both residents and visitors. These options include hunting, fishing, ice and rock climbing, casino gaming, and a diverse array of cultural experiences.

Gaming

In 2024, approximately 1.3 million overnight visitors traveled to Colorado primarily for gaming, making it the sixth most common type of marketable trip to the state. Statewide casino adjusted gross proceeds (AGP) totaled \$1.1 billion in 2024, reflecting a 2.1% increase from 2023 and a 33.2% increase over the past five years.¹⁴

Central City and Black Hawk, located just west of Metro Denver in the Mountain Resort Region and are directly accessible from I-70, are two of Colorado’s primary gaming destinations. Together, these casinos generated approximately \$927 million in AGP in 2024, or nearly 85% of statewide casino revenue. Because these destinations rely heavily on visitors traveling from the Front Range, roadway accessibility plays an important role in supporting gaming-related visitation.

Gaming also contributes significantly to public revenues. In 2024, casino activity generated nearly \$176 million in state gaming taxes, of which approximately \$158 million (90%) was generated by casinos in the Mountain Resort Region.

¹² Colorado Off Highway Vehicle Coalition, Economic Contribution of Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation in Colorado.

¹³ Colorado River Outfitters Association, “Commercial River Use in the State of Colorado 1988-2024,” 2024.

¹⁴ Colorado Department of Revenue, Specialized Business Group. (n.d.). Industry statistics – gaming



Cultural Activities and Creative Districts

Colorado offers a wide range of cultural attractions that contribute significantly to the state's tourism economy. Cultural activities in Metro Denver generated approximately \$3.1 billion in economic activity in 2024, with 14.5 million attendees participating in cultural events across the region¹⁵.

While Metro Denver is the largest hub for arts and cultural activity in the state, other regions across the state are supported through programs such as Colorado's Creative District program, administered by the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT).¹⁶ Creative Districts are state-certified areas recognized for their concentration of arts, cultural assets, and creative businesses that contribute to local economic development, strengthen community identity, and attract visitors through cultural programming and events.



Source: Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade

Within the study area, the Mountain Resort Region is home to three Creative Districts: the Grand Lake Creative District (Grand County), the Silverthorne Creative District (Summit County), and the Breckenridge Creative District (Summit County). The Western Slope hosts one district within the study area: the Downtown Grand Junction Creative District (Mesa County).

¹⁵ Colorado Business Committee for the Arts. (2025)

¹⁶ Office of Economic Development and International Trade. (n.d.). Colorado Creative Industries.

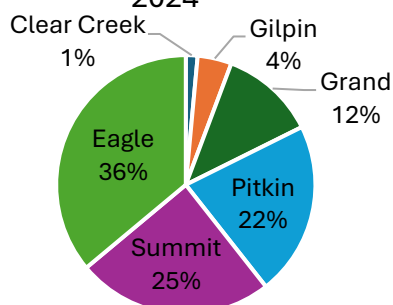
Visitor Spending

As congestion along the I-70 corridor increases, visitor spending patterns may shift across the study region. Colorado residents and visitors may substitute trips to the Mountain Resort Region with local leisure activities, redirecting spending toward Metro Denver or other parts of the state. Within the Mountain Resort Region, impacts may vary geographically. Resorts east of the Eisenhower–Johnson Memorial Tunnel (EJMT), which rely more heavily on day visitors from Metro Denver, may see reduced visitation as travel delays discourage shorter trips, while resorts west of the tunnel, which attract more overnight and fly-in visitors, may be better positioned to offset congestion impacts through longer stays or alternative travel modes such as air travel.

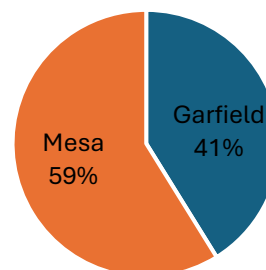
From 2014 to 2024, Colorado travel spending grew at an average annual rate of 4.4%. Travel spending in Colorado grew from \$28.4 billion in 2023 to \$28.5 billion in 2024, representing an increase of 0.5%. Of total visitor spending, approximately 19.3% (\$5.5 billion) occurred along the I-70 corridor in the Mountain Resort Region and the Western Slope.¹⁷

The Mountain Resort Region accounts for the majority of visitor spending along the corridor, generating approximately \$4.7 billion in travel spending in 2024, or 16.5% of total Colorado visitor spending. By comparison, Western Slope counties accounted for roughly 3% of statewide travel spending, totaling \$780 million in 2024. Across the Mountain Resort Region, visitor spending accounts for 35.5% of total retail sales, though this share of spending varies widely by county, largely reflecting the location of major visitor attractions and concentrations of population.

Percentage of Visitor Spending
by County in Mountain Resort,
2024



Percentage of Visitor Spending by
County in Western Slope, 2024



Source: Economic Impact of Travel on Colorado, Dean Runyan Associates, 2024

¹⁷ Dean Runyan Associates, The Economic Impact of Travel in Colorado 2024.

I-70 Alternatives

Air Travel

Air travel represents one alternative to driving along the I-70 corridor, though it accounts for a relatively small share of total visitor trips to Colorado. Approximately 7% of overnight trips to and within Colorado occur by air, with most travelers relying on an automobile.¹⁸ Travelers who fly directly into mountain airports often stay longer and spend more per trip than visitors arriving by car.¹⁹

Four commercial airports located near the corridor provide access to the Mountain Resort and Western Slope regions, including Denver International Airport (DEN), Aspen–Pitkin County Airport (ASE), Eagle County Regional Airport (EGE), and Grand Junction Regional Airport (GJT). DEN serves as the major gateway for tourism and business travel into the region, and in recent years, airlines have expanded seasonal service from Denver to mountain airports during the winter months to accommodate ski tourism. Increased direct flights between major national hubs and mountain airports have also provided alternative options for out-of-state visitors. In addition to commercial service airports, four general aviation airports located along the corridor support private aviation, charter travel, and aviation-related services that contribute to local economic activity and provide additional air access to mountain communities.

Economic Impact of Regional Airports Along I-70, 2025

Airport	Total Employees	Total Wages (000s)	Wages/Employee	Economic Activity (000s)
Commercial Service Airports				
Aspen-Pitkin County (ASE)	7,316	\$440,292	\$60,182	\$1,351,463
Eagle County Regional (EGE)	4,404	\$269,253	\$61,138	\$783,410
Grand Junction Regional (GJT)	3,398	\$255,276	\$75,125	\$816,984
Denver International (DEN)	244,172	\$15,871,813	\$65,003	\$47,198,930
General Aviation Airports				
Rifle Garfield County	391	\$25,054	\$64,077	\$79,422
KGWS Summers Airpark (Glenwood Springs)	126	\$8,480	\$67,302	\$34,167
Granby-Grand County	53	\$4,247	\$80,132	\$8,401
McElroy Field (Kremmling)	39	\$2,953	\$75,718	\$7,861

Note: Data includes direct, indirect, and induced economic impacts.

Source: Colorado Division of Aeronautics, "2025 Colorado Aviation Economic Impact Study."

¹⁸ Longwoods

¹⁹ Vail Valley Partnership

Other Transportation

Although personal vehicles remain the primary way travelers reach Colorado’s mountain destinations, a growing network of regional transit services and mobility hubs provides alternatives to driving along the I-70 corridor. CDOT operates Bustang, Snowstang, and Pegasus, which connect Metro Denver with mountain communities and help reduce reliance on personal vehicles during peak travel periods. Bustang’s West Line connects Denver Union Station with Glenwood Springs, serving communities such as Idaho Springs, Frisco, Vail, and Avon, and carried about 99,800 passengers in 2024, an 11% increase from the prior year. Snowstang transported roughly 8,000 riders in 2024 through seasonal service to major ski resorts, while Pegasus carried more than 20,000 passengers annually between Denver and Avon. These services are supported by expanding mobility hubs in communities such as Idaho Springs, Frisco, and Avon, which bring together parking, regional and local transit, shuttles, micromobility, and traveler amenities. The Idaho Springs Mobility Hub, opened in 2023, includes more than 400 parking spaces, while the Frisco Transit Center supports more than 1 million annual boardings across multiple transit services. Together, these investments improve multimodal access and help reduce vehicle demand.

Amtrak Ridership by Station, FY 2024

Station	Ridership
Glenwood Springs	36,853
Granby	3,627
Grand Junction	26,936
Winter Park Ski Resort	17,032
Winter Park/Fraser	8,460

Source: Amtrak in Colorado, Factsheet 2024.

Rail service also provides regional and national access to mountain communities. Amtrak’s California Zephyr runs daily between Chicago and San Francisco and includes stops in Denver, Fraser, Granby, Glenwood Springs, and Grand Junction. In addition, the Winter Park Express Ski Train, which operates seasonally between Denver Union Station and Winter Park Resort, carried 43,919 passengers in 2025, a 153% increase from the previous season.²⁰

Local transit systems also support mobility within mountain communities. Services such as Summit Stage, Vail Transit, ECO Transit, RFTA, and The Lift provide free or low-cost transportation between towns, ski resorts, and employment centers, helping reduce local traffic and improve access to recreation and services.

²⁰ Northwest Colorado Council of Governments. (2021, August 30). *Transportation gap analysis assessment*. LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. Retrieved from <https://www.nwccog.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Gap-Analysis-Report-Complete.pdf>.

Lodging Occupancy and Costs

Colorado continues to attract a growing number of overnight visitors, supporting strong demand for lodging across the state. According to the 2024 Colorado Travel USA Visitor Profile by Longwoods International, domestic overnight travel to Colorado increased by 1% from 2023, marking the second consecutive record year for domestic overnight trips. Marketable trips²¹, taken primarily for leisure activities such as outdoor recreation, touring, or gaming, rose 9% to a record 23.5 million visits, while trips to visit friends or relatives declined 9% to 13.6 million visits.

Lodging represents one of the largest components of visitor spending. In 2024, 27% of all spending by domestic overnight visitors, or approximately \$594 per person per trip, was allocated to accommodations. Visitor travel also plays an important role in sustaining hotel occupancy levels and generating revenue for lodging providers.

In communities within the Mountain Resort Region, lodging prices have increased substantially over the past decade. For example, in Vail, the average nightly lodging rate during the 2024–25 winter season was approximately \$747, a 52% increase from an average of \$492 a decade prior. Summer rates have also risen sharply, reaching \$341 per night in summer 2024, up 80% from \$190 in 2014.

The influence of congestion along the I-70 corridor on lodging demand is mixed. Increased travel delays may discourage some recreational trips to mountain destinations, reducing demand for accommodation. At the same time, longer and less predictable travel times may encourage visitors who might otherwise take day trips to stay overnight or extend their visits once in the region. Because these opposing behavioral responses can occur simultaneously, the overall effect of congestion on lodging occupancy in the Mountain Resort Region remains uncertain.

²¹ A marketable trip is an overnight leisure trip taken 50 miles or more one way from home, or a trip involving paid lodging regardless of distance, that is eligible to be influenced by destination marketing.

Resident Impacts

I-70 Congestion affects Metro Denver, Mountain Resort Region, and Western Slope residents by increasing commute times, decreasing personal time, and increasing vehicle and travel costs. **Valuing only the personal time lost due to congestion along the I-70 mountain corridor, the cost of congestion is currently \$319 million annually.**

Three primary residential groups are affected by congestion along I-70: Metro Denver and Western Slope residents traveling to or through the Mountain Resort Region, Mountain Resort Region residents who rely on the corridor for daily activities and employment, and in-state visitors traveling for recreation or business. Congestion particularly impacts commuters and frequent travelers by increasing travel times, reducing reliability, and worsening environmental conditions, especially during peak periods.

Population Trends

Colorado is currently home to an estimated 6.0 million people, with approximately 56%, or 3.3 million people who live in Metro Denver. About 6% of the state's population live along the I-70 Mountain Corridor in the Western Slope and Mountain Resort Region.

Population Trends

	2000	2025	2030	2035	2050	Growth 2000-25	Growth 2025-50
Colorado	4,338,801	5,989,883	6,227,730	6,531,580	7,205,047	38%	20%
Metro Denver	2,421,222	3,335,441	3,472,949	3,641,001	4,013,107	38%	20%
Mtn. Resort Region	111,778	132,399	134,575	140,527	155,466	18%	17%
Western Slope	161,888	225,813	233,780	246,664	271,726	39%	20%

Note: 2025 and later are forecasts.

Source: Colorado State Demography Office.

Between 2000 and 2025, Colorado's population grew at an average annual rate of 1.3%, increasing from 4.3 million to nearly 6.0 million residents. Over the next 25 years, growth is expected to continue but at a slower average annual pace of 0.7%, reaching approximately 7.2 million residents by 2050. Much of this growth will remain concentrated in Metro Denver, though communities along the I-70 corridor are also expected to add residents.

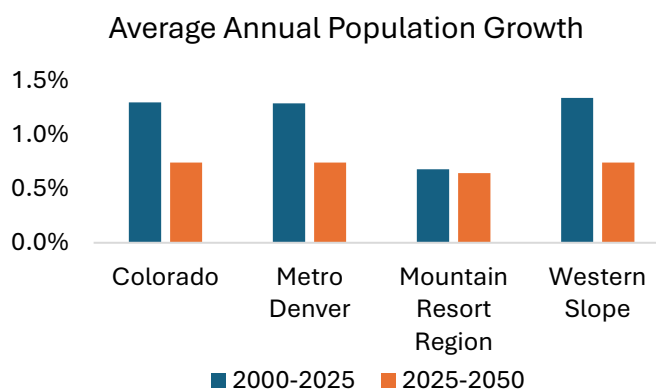
Along the I-70 Mountain Corridor, population growth trends vary greatly, with growth in the Western Slope region more than double the pace of growth in the Mountain Resort Region over the past 25 years.

The Western Slope experienced rapid population growth in the early 2000s, driven largely by a natural gas boom and associated job growth in the mining and logging industries, with growth significantly outpacing the statewide growth rate. This expansion reversed sharply following the Great Recession, as declining natural gas prices curtailed energy-sector

activity in the region. Since that time, net migration to the Western Slope has largely remained below the state average.

Population growth in the Mountain Resort Region lagged the statewide average between 2000 and 2020, largely due to housing availability and affordability constraints. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, official estimates indicate declines in the full-time resident population beginning in 2021 and projected to continue through 2027. These trends partly reflect net out-migration of permanent residents

as second-home ownership, short-term rentals, and investment properties have expanded. As a result, a growing share of housing is classified as non-primary residences, reducing year-round population counts. At the same time, tourism activity and seasonal occupancy remain strong, meaning overall economic activity and infrastructure demand in the region remain elevated despite slower growth in permanent residents.



Metro Denver experienced strong population growth from the mid-2000s through the mid-2010s as the region's expanding economy attracted new residents and supported rapid job growth. Net migration peaked in 2015, when more than 40,000 residents moved to the region in a single year. Since then, population growth has slowed as in-migration has moderated and housing affordability pressures have increased. Despite this slowdown, Metro Denver remains home to more than 3.3 million residents and serves as the primary population base for travel along the I-70 corridor, with Front Range residents accounting for a significant share of recreational trips and tourism activity to the Mountain Resort Region.

Looking ahead, population growth across all three study regions is expected to slow relative to historical trends. Metro Denver and the Western Slope are projected to decline from an average annual growth rate of 1.3% between 2000 and 2025 to roughly 0.7% between 2025 and 2050, while the Mountain Resort Region is expected to grow more modestly at a rate of 0.6% annually. At the same time, Colorado's population is aging, which may reduce labor force participation rates and increase demand for healthcare and other care-related services. Slower growth in working-age populations and continued turnover in tourism-related industries may intensify workforce constraints. As a result, even as population growth moderates, demand for reliable transportation, workforce mobility, and access to essential services along the I-70 corridor is expected to remain elevated.

Vehicle Operating Costs

Traffic congestion increases vehicle operating and maintenance costs by accelerating wear and tear and reducing fuel efficiency. Stop-and-go traffic, combined with steep grades and high-altitude driving along the I-70 corridor, places additional strain on engines, transmissions, brakes, and drivetrains. Prolonged uphill idling increases engine heat and fuel consumption, while extended downhill braking can accelerate brake wear and reduce stopping performance. Over time, these conditions can shorten vehicle lifespans and raise total ownership costs for residents and regular commuters.

According to AAA's Your Driving Costs (2025), the average vehicle incurs approximately \$0.24 per mile in operating costs (fuel and maintenance), equating to roughly \$2,400 per year for a vehicle driven 10,000 miles annually. Operating costs increased substantially with mileage. A medium-sized sedan driven 10,000 miles per year incurs about \$2,303 in annual operating costs, while the same vehicle driven 20,000 miles annually incurs approximately \$4,607. Sport utility vehicles, which are more commonly used along the I-70 corridor due to terrain and weather conditions, incur even higher costs, averaging \$5,288 per year in operating expenses.

AAA Average Operating Costs

	Medium Sedan	Medium 4WD SUV	Mid-size pickup	Electric Vehicle	Weighted Average
Cost Per mile					
Fuel	\$0.111	\$0.147	\$0.168	\$0.051	\$0.130
Maintenance	\$0.119	\$0.118	\$0.114	\$0.101	\$0.110
Total	\$0.230	\$0.264	\$0.282	\$0.151	\$0.240
Cost Based on Annual Miles Driven					
<u>10,000 miles</u>					
Operating costs	\$2,303	\$2,644	\$2,823	\$1,513	\$2,403
Ownership costs	\$6,501	\$8,618	\$7,632	\$8,412	\$7,973
Decreased depreciation*	-\$354	-\$386	-\$393	-\$385	-\$380
Total cost per year	\$8,450	\$10,876	\$10,063	\$9,540	\$9,995
<u>15,000 miles</u>					
Operating costs	\$3,455	\$3,966	\$4,235	\$2,270	\$3,605
Ownership costs	\$6,501	\$8,618	\$7,632	\$8,412	\$7,973
Total cost per year	\$9,956	\$12,584	\$11,867	\$10,682	\$11,577
<u>20,000 miles</u>					
Operating costs	\$4,607	\$5,288	\$5,647	\$3,026	\$4,806
Ownership costs	\$6,501	\$8,618	\$7,632	\$8,412	\$7,973
Increased Depreciation*	\$411	\$449	\$456	\$448	\$442
Total cost per year	\$11,519	\$14,355	\$13,735	\$11,887	\$13,220

Source: AAA, Your Driving Costs, 2025

*Depreciation for mileage under or over 15,000 miles annually averaged over 5 years.

Fuel represents the largest single component of operating costs, accounting for roughly 50-60% of total operating expenses across most vehicle types. While global oil prices have fluctuated in recent years, fuel costs remain elevated relative to historical levels, rising from \$1.48 per gallon in 2000 to \$3.10 per gallon in 2025. The Texas A&M Transportation Institute’s 2025 Urban Mobility Report estimates that the average auto commuter wasted 18 gallons of fuel in 2024 due to congestion, translating to approximately \$56 per year in wasted fuel at current prices. Given reduced fuel efficiency associated with mountain driving, congestion along I-70 is likely to amplify these costs for frequent I-70 corridor users.

The relative cost burden of vehicle operating expenses varies by region due to differences in wages. For a typical sedan driven 15,000 miles annually, total ownership and operating costs exceed \$9,956 per year, with approximately \$3,455 attributed to operating costs alone. Based on average hourly wages, it takes approximately 80 hours of work for a Metro Denver resident to cover annual vehicle operating costs, compared with 111 hours for a Mountain Resort Region resident and 121 hours of work for a Western Slope resident

As congestion increases, wear-and-tear and operating expenses become elevated, and vehicle costs consume a larger share of household income, particularly for residents in regions with lower average wages. These factors suggest that congestion-related increases in vehicle operating costs represent a meaningful and uneven economic burden for residents along the I-70 corridor.

Hours of Work to Cover Vehicle Operating Costs by Region

Region	Average Hourly Wage	Hours of Work Required to Cover Annual Vehicle Operating Costs
Metro Denver	\$43.22	80 hours
Mountain Resort Region	\$31.14	111 hours
Western Slope	\$28.58	121 hours

Opportunity & Sunk Costs

Motorists delayed by traffic lose time that could otherwise be spent working, resting, studying, or spending time with family and friends. These foregone activities represent the opportunity costs of congestion. According to the IRIX 2025 Global Traffic Scorecard, the typical U.S. driver lost 49 hours to traffic congestion in 2025, equivalent to a full work week, valued at \$894 per driver per year. Travelers to the Mountain Resort Region can spend hours in congested traffic while traveling to and from their destination at all times of the year. Drivers may have to arrive late or leave early from their destination to avoid traffic congestion, which can decrease the overall enjoyment visitors have during their recreational activity.

Additional direct costs associated with spending less time at the destination include the sunk cost of activity fees. For example, a visitor who pays \$250 for a ski lift ticket and intends to ski for six hours effectively pays \$42 per hour of recreation. If congestion delays arrival by two hours or prompts an early departure to avoid peak traffic, that same ticket now costs more than \$60 per hour of actual use. Because lift tickets, event admissions, guided excursions, and equipment rentals are typically flat fees, time lost in traffic does not reduce the price paid; however, it does reduce the value received.

These sunk costs compound the broader opportunity costs of congestion. Visitors may forgo meals, retail purchases, or additional activities due to shortened stays. Residents commuting for work or personal obligations similarly absorb unrecoverable costs when delays reduce productive time or paid work hours. Over time, these repeated inefficiencies diminish the overall return on recreation, business travel, and even commuting.



Travel Time Costs

Metro Denver

Metro Denver's proximity to the Rocky Mountains is a key regional advantage, but congestion on I-70 limits the value of this benefit. A resident may spend added time away from work, family, and other commitments to compensate for the additional travel time. Increased travel times may also cut into time spent at the destination, decreasing enjoyment for recreational trips and decreasing productivity for business-related trips.

With no congestion, the route from the City and County of Denver to Copper Mountain takes roughly one hour and 15 minutes. With congestion on I-70, travel time increases by 60 minutes on weekends and 20 minutes on weekdays²². As Metro Denver residents shift schedules to avoid peak travel times, the peak times may become less intense but will be more widespread, re-circulating the problem.

Using the 2024 average hourly wage of \$43.22 for all Metro Denver employees as the average opportunity cost per hour of increased travel time, this translates into an additional cost of \$14.41 for every one-way weekday trip from Denver to Copper Mountain and \$43.22 for every weekend trip. Expanding this calculation to include all individuals impacted by congestion over the course of one year, it is estimated that I-70 congestion currently costs Metro Denver residents \$293.5 million per year.

Metro Denver Congestion Costs

(1) Congestion Hours per Trip	1.0
<i>Additional 60 minutes per trip.</i>	
(2) Congestion Days	131
<i>Assumes a period of congestion on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for Nov-April, June-Sept</i>	
(3) Average Daily Traffic	52,590
<i>Average daily traffic during the peak weekends at Idaho Springs Twin Tunnels</i>	
(4) Number of Vehicles Impacted by Congestion Annually	2,612,118
<i>Number of vehicles traveling during the peak winter and summer periods, with peak travel periods varying by day and by time</i>	
(5) Persons Impacted by Congestion Annually	6,791,506
<i>(4)* 2.6 people per vehicle, CDOT average persons per vehicle for a recreational trip</i>	
(6) Opportunity Cost Per Hour	\$43.22
<i>2024 average wage for all employees in Metro Denver</i>	
(7) Total Cost of Congestion	\$293.5 million
<i>Calculation: (1)*(5)*(6)</i>	

Note: Numbers may not add due to rounding.
Source: Metro Denver EDC, Various Sources.

²² 2011 Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS)

Western Slope

The Western Slope region's sustained growth, driven by strong net migration, a robust post-pandemic recovery, and outsized expansion in its commercial real estate sectors, underscores its rising appeal as an affordable, opportunity-rich destination. Housing and living costs remain relatively affordable in Mesa County, while Garfield County's cost of living trends slightly above Metro Denver. As a result, many workers seek more affordable housing in neighboring communities and commute into the county for work. Those longer commutes carry higher opportunity costs, particularly when I-70 congestion adds time to each trip. Even an extra 10 minutes each way during peak summer and winter weekends can accumulate quickly.

Using the 2024 average hourly wage of \$28.58 for all Western Slope employees as the average opportunity cost per hour of increased travel time, these additional 10 minutes of commute time cost \$4.76. Expanding this calculation to include all individuals impacted by congestion over the course of one year, it is estimated that I-70 congestion currently costs Western Slope residents \$5.4 million.

Western Slope Congestion Costs

(1) Congestion Hours per Trip	0.2
<i>Additional 10 minutes per trip.</i>	
(2) Congestion Days	131
<i>Assumes a period of congestion on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for Nov-April, June-Sept</i>	
(3) Average Daily Traffic	19,429
<i>Average daily traffic during the peak weekends at Glenwood Springs Interchange</i>	
(4) Number of Vehicles Impacted by Congestion Annually	1,025,241
<i>Number of vehicles traveling during the peak winter and summer periods, with peak travel periods varying by day and by time</i>	
(5) Persons Impacted by Congestion Annually	1,127,765
<i>(4)* 1.1 people per vehicle for commuter trips</i>	
(6) Opportunity Cost Per Hour	\$28.58
<i>2024 average wage for all employees in Western Slope</i>	
(7) Total Cost of Congestion	\$5.4 million
<i>Calculation: (1)*(5)*(6)</i>	

Note: Numbers may not add due to rounding.

Source: Metro Denver EDC, Various Sources.

Commute Time Costs

Mountain Resort Region

Residents of the Mountain Resort Region may rely on I-70 as the primary route to their place of work. As congestion increases on I-70, it may take workers longer to reach their job site, especially during peak weekend travel times. Even an additional 10 minutes per trip during summer and winter weekends adds up quickly.

Using the 2024 average hourly wage of \$31.14 for all Mountain Resort Region employees as the average opportunity cost per hour of increased travel time, these additional 10 minutes of commute time cost workers \$5.19. Expanding this calculation to include all individuals impacted by congestion over the course of one year, it is estimated that I-70 congestion currently costs Mountain Resort Region residents \$20.2 million.

Mountain Resort Region Congestion Costs

(1) Congestion Hours per Trip	0.2
<i>Additional 10 minutes per trip.</i>	
(2) Congestion Days	131
<i>Assumes a period of congestion on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for Nov-April, June-Sept</i>	
(3) Average Daily Traffic	21,946
<i>Average daily traffic during the peak weekends at Copper Mountain SH 91 Interchange</i>	
(4) Number of Vehicles Impacted by Congestion Annually	2,285,784
<i>Number of vehicles traveling during the peak winter and summer periods, with peak travel periods varying by day and by time</i>	
(5) Persons Impacted by Congestion Annually	3,885,832
<i>(4)* 1.7 people per vehicle, CDOT average persons per vehicle for a local trip</i>	
(6) Opportunity Cost Per Hour	\$31.14
<i>2024 average wage for all employees in Mountain Resort Region</i>	
(7) Total Cost of Congestion	\$20.2 million
<i>Calculation: (1)*(5)*(6)</i>	

Note: Numbers may not add due to rounding.

Source: Metro Denver EDC, Various Sources.

Business Impact

Colorado's mountains are central to the state's quality of life and play an important role in business recruitment and retention. Easy access to outdoor recreation has long helped companies attract and retain skilled workers; however, increasing congestion along the I-70 corridor threatens this advantage. As travel times become longer and less predictable, access to the Mountain Resort Region becomes more difficult, negatively impacting one of Colorado's key lifestyle benefits.

Congestion also creates direct economic costs for businesses by reducing worker productivity, increasing commuting challenges, and raising freight and distribution costs. Even modest productivity losses can have significant statewide impacts. **If worker productivity and business efficiency decline by just 0.5% due to congestion-related factors, Colorado's GDP could decrease by nearly \$1.9 billion annually.**

Value of Business Operations

Traffic congestion can impact businesses in multiple ways. Increased travel times raise distribution and delivery costs, driving up the price of goods and services. Recruiting and retaining employees may also become more difficult as commuting challenges discourage potential workers, often resulting in higher wage demands. Congestion can further reduce worker productivity when employees arrive fatigued or stressed from traffic or when travel delays shorten work hours. Over time, these challenges translate into higher operating costs for businesses. Depending on how companies respond, these costs may be passed on to consumers through higher prices or absorbed internally through reduced profit margins.

Using Colorado Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per employee as a proxy for the value of business activity, even a small decline in productivity can have meaningful economic consequences. In 2024, the average hourly contribution to Colorado's GDP per employee was approximately \$91.80. A 0.5% decline in productivity due to congestion-related factors would reduce Colorado's GDP by about \$381 per worker annually. With nearly 2 million employees across Metro Denver, the Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope, this modest reduction in per-person productivity would translate into an estimated \$1.9 billion decline in Colorado GDP each year. This impact may also be interpreted as a reduction in the rate of economic growth. While Colorado's GDP increased by an average of \$31 billion annually between 2020 and 2024, a portion of the potential growth may have been constrained by congestion-related impacts on worker productivity and business efficiency.

Money from Tourism

Metro Denver

As congestion along the I-70 corridor increases, some visitors may substitute mountain trips with leisure activities closer to home. This shift could redirect a portion of tourism and recreation spending toward Metro Denver, supporting sales for certain local businesses. In this sense, congestion along I-70 could produce limited economic benefits for Metro Denver's tourism industry, although the net effect is uncertain.

In 2024, approximately 49%, or \$13.9 billion, of total visitor spending in Colorado occurred in the Denver area¹. This share could increase if congestion discourages discretionary travel to mountain destinations. However, potential gains may be offset if visitors seeking to avoid roadway congestion bypass Metro Denver entirely by flying directly into regional airports west of Idaho Springs.

At the same time, prolonged congestion may reduce overall recreational participation among Metro Denver residents, lowering demand for certain goods and services such as sporting equipment and outdoor recreation retail. As a result, the net impact of I-70 congestion on Metro Denver tourism activity reflects a balance between redirected spending, alternative travel patterns, and reduced discretionary recreation.

Mountain Resort Region

At lower levels of congestion, traffic delays along the I-70 corridor can generate localized economic benefits when travelers exit the interstate to purchase food, retail goods, or lodging while waiting for traffic to improve. However, as congestion intensifies, these incidental benefits diminish. During periods of sustained congestion, motorists are less likely to leave the interstate due to concerns about losing their position in traffic or encountering longer delays. As a result, through-traffic increasingly bypasses I-70 corridor communities, reducing opportunities for visitor spending and placing downward pressure on tourism-dependent businesses.

Mountain Resort Region businesses conduct an average of approximately \$2.3 million in tourism-related transactions each workday hour². If congestion disrupts regular visitor flows into the region, tourism-related revenues may decline accordingly.

¹ Longwoods International, [The 2024 Economic Impact of Travel on Colorado 2024 Report](#)

² Source: Dean Runyan Associates, Economic Impact of Travel on Colorado 2024 report. Calculated based on 2080 work hours per year. To avoid double counting, the broader economic value of tourism expenditures is addressed separately in the Tourism Impacts section.

Employee Costs

Mountain Resort Region

Businesses in the Mountain Resort Region, particularly those that rely on employees who commute, are increasingly exposed to indirect labor costs associated with congestion along the I-70 corridor. Approximately 81% of Mountain Resort Region employees live within the Mountain Resort Region, while 19% commute from outside the region.³ Even among local residents, long commute distances are common due to the high cost and limited availability of housing near major employment centers, increasing reliance on predictable travel conditions along I-70 and connecting roadways.

Housing affordability challenges in resort communities have intensified in recent years as rising land and construction costs, tourism growth, second-home ownership, and short-term rentals have constrained housing supply. In response, many employers absorb congestion-related labor costs by increasing wages to offset longer and less reliable commutes or by partnering with local governments to expand workforce housing. Major resort operators and municipalities, including Vail Resorts and Aspen Skiing Company, have invested in workforce housing, while several counties have implemented deed-restricted and price-limited housing programs reserved for local employees.

Demographic and labor market projections suggest these pressures will intensify. According to the Colorado State Demography Office, the Mountain Resort Region's population is projected to grow by approximately 17.4% by 2050, while employment is expected to increase by 20.4% over the same period. This divergence indicates a structural imbalance of labor supply and demand, compounded by the region's relatively low labor force participation rate, with only about half of residents engaged in the workforce. Persistent labor shortages, particularly in hospitality and tourism industries, reflect the combined effects of seasonal employment patterns, limited workforce housing, and commuting challenges.

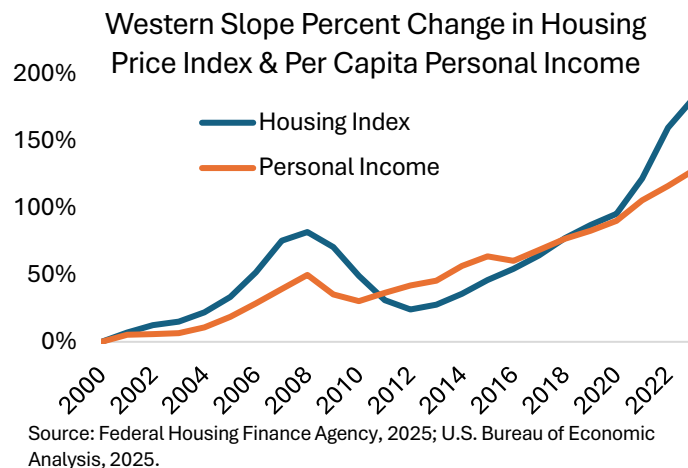
If congestion along the I-70 corridor worsens, these constraints are likely to translate into higher business costs through increased wages, expanded housing subsidies, and greater employee turnover and absenteeism associated with unreliable travel times. In this context, congestion functions not only as a transportation issue but also as a compounding factor in the Mountain Resort Region's labor market, increasing the cost of maintaining a stable workforce.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2016-2020, Commuting Flows.

Western Slope

Businesses on the Western Slope increasingly face workforce challenges linked to rising housing costs and limited housing availability. As housing prices rise faster than local incomes, residents may be forced to live farther from job centers or leave the region entirely.

Data from the Federal Housing Finance Agency show that the home price index for Garfield and Mesa counties more than doubled between 2014 and 2023, while residents' per capita personal income rose by a more modest 128%, widening the gap between housing costs and local earning capacity. This divergence accelerated after 2020 as pandemic-related demand shocks, low interest rates, and increased second-home and investment activity pushed housing prices upward.



Housing market trends have also shifted alongside changes in the regional economy. During the mid-2000s energy boom, housing demand and property values rose sharply in energy-dependent communities. Since then, the influence of the energy sector has declined, with the share of workers employed in natural resources and mining in Garfield and Mesa counties falling from about 6–8% between 2006 and 2014 to roughly 3% in recent years. Lifestyle migration, retirement migration, and tourism-related demand have since played a larger role in sustaining housing price growth.

In response to affordability pressures, some Western Slope counties have implemented workforce housing initiatives. Garfield County, for example, supports employer participation in the Employee Home Ownership Program (EHOP) through the Impact Development Fund, provides deed-restricted housing prioritized for local workers, and reserves select units for county employees⁴. Despite these efforts, housing constraints continue to place upward pressure on labor costs, requiring employers to offer higher wages, housing assistance, or longer-distance commuting options to attract and retain workers.

⁴ Garfield County Housing Authority.

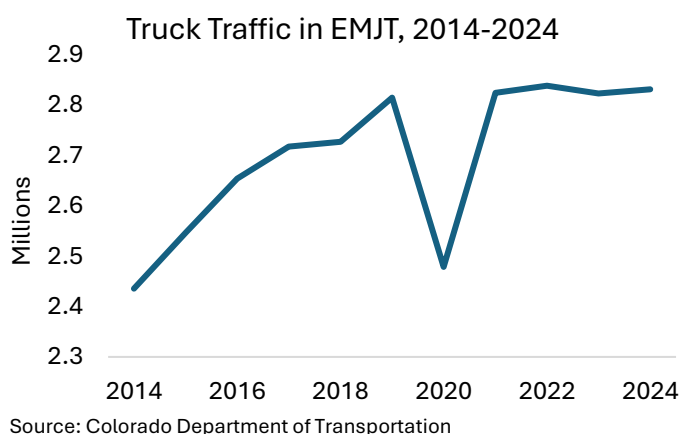
Freight/Trucking Impact

Although trucks are highly visible along the I-70 Mountain Corridor and are often perceived as a major source of congestion, they represent a relatively small share of total traffic, particularly during peak travel periods. Trucking activity typically accounts for just 2–3% of vehicles during peak congestion, with delays driven primarily by surges in recreational and passenger travel rather than freight volumes. During these periods, trucks on the roadway are often making essential deliveries to mountain communities, which rely on frequent shipments due to limited storage capacity in commercial spaces.

Unlike passenger travel, which is highly seasonal and discretionary, freight movement along I-70 is continuous and essential to Colorado’s economy. Trucks transport critical goods, including food, fuel, medical supplies, and retail inventory, and in many mountain segments, there are few viable alternative routes. Colorado’s freight system moved approximately 382 million tons of goods valued at \$472 billion in 2021, with 62% of freight activity occurring within the state. By 2040, freight volumes are projected to increase by 17% and value by more than 50%, with the fastest growth occurring in internal freight movements.

Trucking dominates freight movement in Colorado, accounting for about 60% of total tonnage and just over half of total value. Along the I-70 corridor, freight flows reflect both local economic activity and long-distance passthrough traffic. However, mountainous terrain, weather variability, and limited routing options already make freight movement more costly and complex, with higher fuel consumption, vehicle wear, labor costs, and exposure to delays and safety risks.

Congestion compounds these challenges. In 2024, trucks accounted for approximately 9.8% of vehicle miles traveled along the corridor, with about 2.8 million trucks and through-vehicles using I-70. Truck traffic increased by 16.2% between 2014 and 2024, adding roughly 400,000 trucks annually. Estimated truck delays totaled 159,100 hours in 2024, with congestion increasing shipping costs by approximately \$14 million based on an average delay cost of \$90.78 per hour.



To manage congestion, many carriers adjust delivery schedules to avoid peak periods, but these strategies introduce additional costs, including wage premiums for off-peak operations, longer travel distances, and reduced efficiency. Some long-haul carriers reroute to corridors such as I-80 or I-40, increasing travel time and fuel use. Winter conditions further exacerbate delays through chain requirements, limited staging areas, and increased driver fatigue.

Freight impacts are particularly significant for mountain communities, where limited warehouse capacity requires frequent deliveries of nondurable goods. Many communities maintain only a few days' worth of essential supplies, making them vulnerable to disruptions during closures or severe weather events. In these areas, freight movement along I-70 functions as critical infrastructure rather than discretionary activity, with disruptions raising concerns about supply shortages and food security.

Business survey findings underscore this dependence, with 75% of businesses rating the corridor as important and 86% as very to extremely important for supply chain operations. Nearly half report increased shipping costs due to congestion. **Of total truck traffic, approximately 14% directly serves local mountain communities, translating to an estimated \$2 million in localized business cost impacts.**

Freight/Trucking Impact 2024

Hours of Annual Truck Delay	159,100 hours
Average Cost of Congestion per Truck Hour	\$90.78
Estimated Total Shipping Cost Increase	\$14 million
Share of Truck Traffic Serving Local Mountain Communities	14%
Estimated Local Business Cost Impact	\$2 million



Government Impacts

Increased traffic congestion along I-70 can raise government service costs, particularly for emergency response, law enforcement, and roadway management costs. Higher housing costs in the Mountain Resort Region put pressure on local governments to provide costly workforce housing solutions, while also making it harder to recruit and retain employees. Further, **if tourism activity in the Mountain Resort Region falls by even 1% due to traffic congestion, state, county, and city sales tax revenue will decrease by \$2.3 million.** Local governments in the three study areas are likely to experience changes in service costs and tax revenue as a result of I-70 congestion.

Employee Costs

High housing costs across the Mountain Resort Region and the Western Slope create workforce challenges with fiscal implications for local governments and employers. In 2024, median single-family home prices ranged from approximately \$573,500 in Gilpin County to \$7.4 million in Pitkin County, compared with the statewide median of \$580,000.⁵ As housing prices rise, many workers in mountain and Western Slope communities can no longer live near their workplaces and instead commute from more affordable areas. Longer commuting distances increase transportation pressures along the corridor and can contribute to congestion, particularly during peak tourism periods. As travel times become longer and less predictable, employers may face higher labor costs as they raise wages, offer hiring incentives, or provide housing assistance to attract and retain workers.

In response, local governments and housing authorities have implemented a variety of workforce housing initiatives, including deed-restricted housing programs, dedicated housing revenues, impact fees, density incentives, and Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) programs that encourage the development of employee housing units. For example, the Town of Vail's housing program plans to add approximately 1,000 deed-restricted units by 2027, while the Aspen/Pitkin County Housing Authority administers more than 300 workforce housing units⁶. Some communities have also piloted programs that convert short-term rental units into long-term employee housing. While these initiatives help address workforce access and support the tourism economy, they require ongoing public investment and administrative oversight. As housing affordability challenges and I-70 congestion persist, local governments along the I-70 corridor may face increasing fiscal pressures to fund workforce housing programs and related infrastructure that support employee access to jobs.

⁵ Colorado Association of Realtors.

⁶ Vail Housing 2027 Plan, Aspen Daily News.

Tax Revenue

Local governments in the Mountain Resort Region rely heavily on visitor spending to generate tax revenue. Retail purchases, restaurant spending, lodging, and second-home activity all contribute to the sales and property tax base that supports municipal services. Increasing congestion along the I-70 corridor may reduce this revenue by discouraging travelers from stopping in corridor communities or making trips to the region altogether. Historically, motorists exited the highway to visit local businesses during their journey. As congestion periods have lengthened, travelers are increasingly reluctant to leave the highway and risk losing their place in traffic. Some travelers may substitute trips to mountain destinations with leisure activities closer to home, shifting spending away from mountain communities and toward other regions.

In 2025, total retail sales in the Mountain Resort Region exceeded \$13.6 billion, generating approximately \$249 million in state sales tax revenue and \$436 million in city and county sales tax revenue. Of this total, approximately \$4.4 billion in tourism spending generated over \$84 million in state sales tax revenue and \$144 million in local sales tax revenue. Because local governments depend heavily on visitor-related spending, even small changes in tourism activity can affect municipal finances: a 1% decrease in tourism expenditures in the Mountain Resort Region would reduce state and local sales tax revenue by approximately \$2.3 million. If congestion discourages trips or shifts visitor spending to other areas, the resulting decline in tourism activity could constrain local governments' ability to fund services that support both residents and visitors.

Closures along I-70 also reduce sales tax revenue for corridor-adjacent communities. When inbound travel is blocked, visitors cannot reach mountain towns, so associated retail, dining, and recreation spending is generally lost rather than deferred. As discussed later (see *Weather and Environmental Impact of Congestion and Traffic Patterns*), inbound closures can eliminate day-visitor spending entirely, while outbound closures may temporarily increase spending by trapping visitors already in the corridor. These lost or shifted transactions directly affect taxable sales, translating corridor reliability challenges into measurable fiscal impacts for mountain communities.

Major I-70 Mountain Corridor capacity expansions provide long-term mobility and safety benefits but can disrupt nearby communities during construction. The Floyd Hill Project illustrates this tradeoff. Colorado State University's Regional Economic Development Institute (REDI@CSU) used a synthetic control approach—a “faux county” weighted from similar Colorado counties—to isolate construction's impact on retail activity in Clear Creek County. Comparing actual outcomes with this counterfactual helps quantify effects on local businesses and highlights opportunities for further research on corridor-adjacent communities.

CASE STUDY

Floyd Hill Construction Impacts on Retail Activity

Clear Creek County, Colorado | FY2024–FY2025

Construction on the I-70 Floyd Hill Project began in July 2023. This case study summarizes independent research estimating the short-run economic disruption in Clear Creek County during early construction — evidence that directly informs this report's construction-impact discussion.

\$24M

Estimated retail sales shortfall per year, countywide (FY2024–FY2025)

214

Fewer operating retailers per year than expected

\$7M

Annual shortfall in Idaho Springs, closest to the construction zone

~\$0

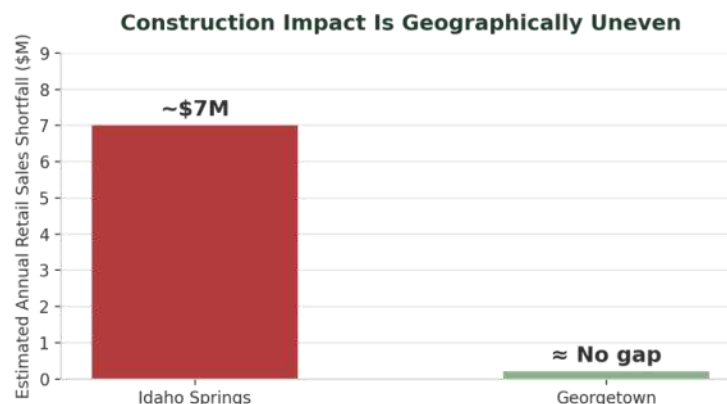
Gap in Georgetown, which closely tracked its synthetic comparison

Method

Researchers compared observed retail outcomes in Clear Creek County to a “synthetic” county built from a weighted combination of unaffected Colorado counties with similar pre-construction retail trends. The divergence between actual and synthetic outcomes after FY2023 provides an estimate of the construction-period effect.

Key Finding: Impact Is Geographically Uneven

The countywide estimates mask meaningful local differences. Idaho Springs, most directly exposed to construction traffic and detours, shows a clear and sustained divergence from its synthetic benchmark. Georgetown, despite being nearby, tracks its synthetic comparison closely — suggesting proximity to active construction, not corridor-wide disruption, drives most of the effect.



Why It Matters For This Report

This report's Construction Cost Impacts section notes that short-term construction disruption “is not quantified in this analysis.” The REDI@CSU findings fill that gap with county-level evidence from an active I-70 corridor project, and offer a useful empirical benchmark for anticipating similar effects as construction continues on other corridor segments.

Policy Implications

Recommended mitigation for communities along active construction corridors: construction-period business outreach, wayfinding/access information, visitor-retention marketing, and temporary support for the most exposed local firms.

Source: Komarek, T. & Miller, R. "Floyd Hill Construction and Retail Activity in Clear Creek County." REDI Report, REDI@CSU, April 2026.



Traffic Incidents and Emergency Services

Traffic incidents along the I-70 corridor impose significant costs on public agencies responsible for emergency response, law enforcement, and roadway management. Congested highway conditions can increase crash risk by reducing vehicle spacing and driver attention. Research indicates that a one-unit increase in a congestion index can raise peak-hour crashes by 34%.⁷ The Federal Highway Administration notes that unstable traffic flow and short headways under congested conditions are major contributors to collisions.⁸ Other studies suggest that prolonged congestion can increase aggressive and distracted driving behaviors, further contributing to crash risk.^{9,10}

In 2024, nearly 8% of all traffic accidents in Colorado occurred along I-70 in the Mountain Resort Region and Western Slope.¹¹ Responding to these incidents requires substantial public resources, including Colorado State Patrol enforcement, emergency medical response, traffic management, and roadway clearing operations. As congestion increases, crash frequency may rise, placing additional operational demands on state and local agencies responsible for maintaining safety and mobility. Congestion also creates operational challenges for emergency services by delaying response times, restricting roadway access for emergency vehicles, and increasing safety risks for first responders.¹²

A survey of emergency medical service providers finding that traffic congestion increased response time by an average of 10 minutes.

-Federal Highway Administration.
2023. *Traffic Congestion and Reliability: Trends and Advanced Strategies for Congestion Mitigation*.

Crash incidents generate significant societal costs beyond the direct use of public resources. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, society bears about 75% of crash costs through higher insurance premiums, taxes, lost productivity, excess fuel consumption, and environmental impacts. Federal estimates place the lifetime economic cost at approximately \$1.6 million per fatality and \$979,000 per critically injured survivor.¹³ Based on these estimates, fatal crashes

⁷ Phan, D. C., & Truong, L. T. 2024. Traffic congestion and safety: Mixed effects on total and fatal crashes. *Sustainability*, 16(20), 8911.

⁸ Federal Highway Administration. 2023. *Traffic Congestion and Reliability: Trends and Advanced Strategies for Congestion Mitigation*. U.S. Department of Transportation, Office of Operations.

⁹ Zhao, S., Qi, G., Li, P., & Guan, W. (2024). The aggressive driving performance caused by congestion based on behavior and EEG analysis. *Journal of Safety Research*, 91, 381-392.

¹⁰ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. 2000. *Aggressive driving enforcement: Strategies for implementing best practices*. U.S. Department of Transportation, NHTSA.

¹¹ Colorado Department of Transportation, Colorado Crash Data Dashboard.

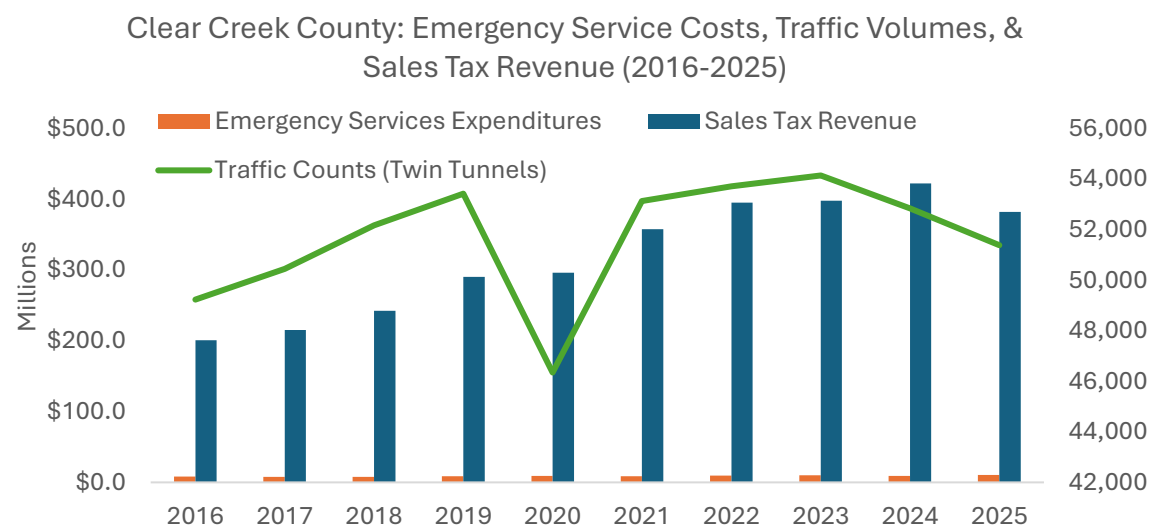
¹² U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration. 2004. *Traffic congestion and reliability: Linking solutions to problems (Chapter 3)*.

¹³ U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. *The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes*, 2019.

investigated by the Colorado State Patrol along I-70 in the Mountain Resort Region and Western Slope resulted in a societal cost of approximately \$60.8 million in 2024.

Clear Creek County is one example of a community experiencing these dynamics directly. Over the past decade, Clear Creek County's emergency-services expenditures have increased by over 27%, driven by rising call volumes, congestion, crashes, and frequent I-70 closures. Traffic volumes in Idaho Springs (Twin Tunnels) have been consistently above 50,000 vehicles per day since 2017, reflecting a long-term increase of roughly 4%. However, sales tax revenue has not increased in proportion to traffic. Instead, revenue has fluctuated with broader economic conditions and declined sharply in 2025 despite sustained high traffic volumes. This long-term divergence illustrates a structural mismatch: increased throughput along I-70 does not generate additional revenue for local governments, yet it does increase the cost of responding to incidents. As a result, mountain communities face ongoing pressure to meet rising emergency-service demands even as the revenue needed to support those services does not consistently grow alongside corridor traffic.

Since the pandemic, that mismatch has grown more pronounced. Emergency-services expenditures rose from \$9.0 million in 2020 to over \$10.2 million in 2025, an increase of roughly 14%, even as traffic volumes remained essentially flat, ranging between 46,000 and 54,000 vehicles per day, with no sustained upward trend. Sales tax revenue initially surged during the statewide economic rebound, climbing from \$296 million in 2020 to \$422 million in 2024, but then dropped sharply to \$382 million in 2025, a 9.5% decline, despite stable traffic and rising emergency-service costs. Revenue trends have diverged from traffic patterns, with sales tax collections increasing through 2024 and then falling in 2025 even as emergency-service demands continued to escalate, widening the gap between service needs and the revenue available to support them.



Sources: Colorado Department of Transportation; Clear Creek County Finance & Budget; Colorado Department of

Emergency Service Providers and Estimated Annual Costs Along the I-70 Mountain Corridor¹

Provider	Office	Jurisdiction/Coverage	Estimated Annual Cost (annual/estimated attributable to I-70 response)	Notes
Colorado State Patrol (Troop C & Troop E)	Troops C & E	Statewide; major focus on I-70 mountain corridor	~\$150M statewide (corridor share significant)	Responds to crashes, traffic control, winter enforcement
CDOT Incident Management & Safety Patrol	N/A	I-70 corridor	~\$20–25M statewide (est. \$5M–\$8.8M)	Provides incident clearance, traffic control, motorist assistance
Clear Creek County	Sheriff's Office	Idaho Springs to Georgetown	~\$9.57M (est. \$3.6M–\$4M)	Responds to crashes, winter traction enforcement, traffic control, detours, and incident management along the busiest mountain segment of I-70
	Emergency Medical Services	County & I-70 Corridor	~\$4.3M (est. \$1.6M–\$1.8M)	Medical response, transport, triage, crash support
	Fire Authority	Countywide; canyon + tunnel areas	~\$2.1M (est. \$800K–\$900K)	Extrication, fire suppression, hazmat, rescue operations
	Emergency Telephone / 911 Dispatch	Countywide	~\$500k; (est. \$200K)	Emergency Telephone / 911 Dispatch
Summit County	Sheriff's Office	Countywide; primary law enforcement responder for I 70 (Silverthorne–Frisco–Dillon)	~\$21.7M (est. \$5.4M–\$6.5M)	Crash response, traffic control, traction enforcement, detours, stranded motorists
	Lake Dillon Fire/Summit Fire & EMS	Fire, rescue, and EMS response along I 70 corridor	~\$8M (est. \$2M–\$2.4M)	Extrication, fire suppression, hazmat, medical response; high I-70 call volume
	Communications/911 Dispatch	Countywide emergency communications	~\$10.1M (est. \$2.5M–\$3M)	Dispatching for Sheriff, Fire/EMS, Search & Rescue;

¹ The percentage breakouts for the I-70 Corridor is based on Colorado State Patrol incidents actually occurring along I-70, using crash and motorist-assist locations mapped by mile marker to each county segment of the mountain corridor. Clear Creek County has the highest incidents based on the highest crash density, steep grades, and tunnel approaches ranging from 38% and 42%. Summit County includes heavy winter traction enforcement and high tourist volume, accounting for between 25% and 30%. Eagle County ranges from 20%-25% based on high traffic volume and moderate crash density. Garfield County is based on lower crash density except Glenwood Canyon, ranging from 10%-15%.

	Search & rescue	Countywide	~\$107k (est. \$30K)	critical for I-70 incident coordination Supports winter rescues, large-scale incidents, and canyon emergencies
Eagle County	Sheriff's Office	Countywide	~\$18.5M (est. \$3.7M-\$4.6M)	Crash response, traffic control, closures
	Paramedic Services	Countywide	~\$12.4M (est. \$2.5M-\$3.1M)	High EMS call volume on I-70; canyon incidents
	911 Communications	Countywide	~\$2.3M (est. \$500K-\$600K)	Dispatching for all I-70 incidents
	Emergency Management	Countywide	~\$407K (est. \$100K)	Canyon closures, wildfire evacuations, flood response
Eagle River Fire Protection District	Fire	Towns of Avon, Minturn and Red Cliff; communities of Arrowhead, Bachelor Gulch, Cordillera, EagleVail, Edwards, & portions of Wolcott	~\$15.6M (est. \$3.1M-\$3.9M)	Fire/rescue/EMS; major I-70 crash zone
Vail Fire & Emergency Services	Fire/rescue	Town of Vail & the Vail Mountain Resort, extending along the I-70 corridor from Dowd Junction (Mile Marker 171) to the summit of Vail Pass (Mile Marker 190)	~\$7M (est. \$1.4M-\$1.8M)	Fire/rescue near Vail Pass
Gypsum Fire Protection District	Fire/rescue	Town of Gypsum east to the Eagle County Airport, parts of Buckhorn Valley	~\$3.8M (est. \$800K-\$900K)	Fire/rescue near Gypsum
Garfield County	Sheriff's Office	Countywide	~\$28.4M (est. \$2.8M-\$4.3M)	Crash response, traffic control, closures
Colorado River Fire Protection District (Colorado River Fire Rescue)	Fire Rescue	Western half of Garfield County's I-70 corrido	~\$9M (est. \$900K-\$1.4M)	Fire protection, hazardous materials containment, emergency medical and transport services to Rifle, Silt, & New Castle

Glenwood Springs Fire Department	Fire/rescue	City of Glenwood Springs, Glenwood Canyon, Sunlight Mountain Resort, Portions of the White River National Forest	~\$10.8M (est. \$1.1M-\$1.6M)	Fire/rescue in Glenwood Springs area
Grand River Health EMS	Emergency medical services	Western Garfield County, including portions of New Castle, Silt, Rifle, Parachute, Battlement Mesa	~\$6M (est. \$600K-\$900K)	Emergency medical services

Sources: Colorado State Patrol; Colorado Department of Transportation Incident Management & Safety Patrol; Clear Creek County Finance & Budget; Summit County Finance; Eagle County Finance; Eagle River Fire Protection District; Town of Vail Finance; Gypsum Fire Protection District; Garfield County Finance; Colorado River Fire Protection District; City of Glenwood Springs; Grand River Health.

Construction Cost Impacts

Construction costs are a key consideration in evaluating congestion along the I-70 Mountain Corridor, particularly where delays in implementing improvements allow costs to escalate over time. The corridor's mountainous terrain, environmental sensitivity, and engineering complexity make infrastructure projects inherently expensive.

Delaying investment increases these costs significantly. Rising prices for labor, materials, and equipment, combined with broader inflationary pressures and tariffs on key inputs such as steel and aluminum, continue to drive construction cost escalation. Since 2011, estimated capital costs for corridor improvements have increased by approximately 53%, with total costs now ranging from \$2.9 billion to \$30.8 billion (2025 dollars). Each year of delay compounds these increases, raising the long-term financial burden on taxpayers.

In addition to capital costs, ongoing maintenance represents a substantial and growing expense. Under a no-action scenario, annual operations and maintenance costs along the corridor are estimated at approximately \$44 million in 2025. More extensive improvement alternatives would increase annual costs to as much as \$52 - \$65 million. Maintenance costs are particularly high in mountain segments and tunnels, where harsh weather, steep grades, and heavy use accelerate wear and require more intensive upkeep.

While construction activity can generate short-term economic benefits, including increased employment and local spending, it also introduces temporary disruptions such as lane closures and additional congestion. These short-term effects are not quantified in this analysis, but the long-term cost trajectory is clear: without timely investment, both capital and maintenance costs will continue to rise, increasing the overall economic burden associated with congestion along the I-70 corridor.



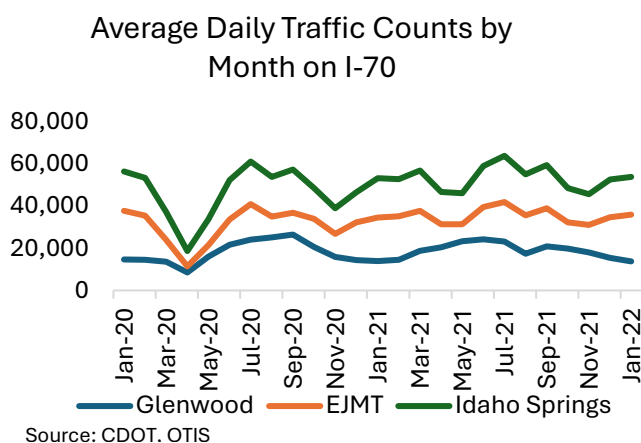
Beyond the Numbers

COVID-19 Traffic Trends and Implications

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic caused an abrupt but temporary disruption to travel behavior. Beginning in March 2020, stay-at-home orders, public space closures, social distancing requirements, and other restrictions led to a rapid decline in vehicle volumes as discretionary travel and tourism activity slowed sharply. Ski area closures and widespread travel hesitancy reduced visitation to the Mountain Resort Region, affecting tourism spending, employment, tax revenue, and traffic volumes along I-70. At the same time, reduced traffic congestion during the pandemic lessened negative environmental impacts, including lower greenhouse gas emissions and decreased air and noise pollution.

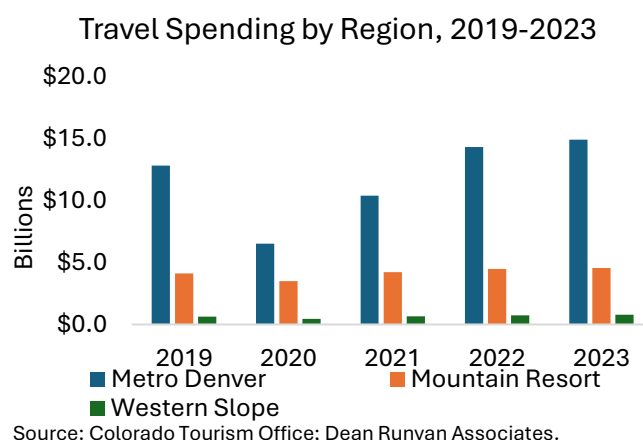
COVID Impact on Traffic Volumes

During the initial shutdown period, traffic volumes on I-70 fell dramatically in the spring of 2020. Travel between the Western Slope and the Mountain Resort Region declined in March and April, with traffic counts along the corridor dropping by more than 50% year-over-year. The largest decline occurred at EJMT, where traffic volumes fell 63.9% between April 2019 and April 2020. But these declines were temporary, and as restrictions eased, travel demand rebounded quickly, returning to pre-pandemic levels by 2022.



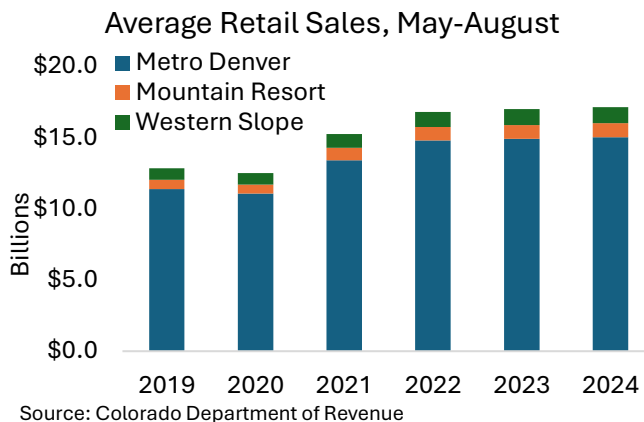
COVID Impact on Travel Spending

Decreased visitation during the COVID-19 pandemic led to sharp but temporary declines in travel spending across all three study areas. Travel spending in the Mountain Resort Region declined 15% from \$4.1 billion in 2019 to \$3.5 billion in 2020. Spending in the Western Slope fell 28% to \$456 million, while Metro Denver spending declined 49% to \$6.5 billion.



Travel and tourism activity rebounded quickly beginning in 2021 and continued to increase through 2023 and 2024, reflecting the temporary nature of pandemic-related disruptions. Similar recovery patterns were observed in travel-related employment, earnings, and tax revenue across all three regions.

Summer spending activity was also affected during the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2020, average retail sales during the May–August period declined 9% in the Mountain Resort Region, 7% in Metro Denver, and 6% in the Western Slope.



During the pandemic, increased interest in outdoor recreation helped offset declines in other travel sectors, as outdoor activities were viewed as lower-risk. Resorts and destination communities expanded outdoor offerings, supporting local economies and contributing to more resilient visitation as travel demand returned. Reduced travel also affected transportation revenue. According to the Colorado Legislative Council Revenue Forecast, transportation-related revenue subject to TABOR fell 3.5% by the end of FY 2020–21, the second consecutive annual decline as fuel tax collections dropped. Colorado Highway Users Tax Fund revenue also fell for a second year, decreasing 2.6% due to reduced fuel consumption.

COVID-Related Funding

Although the pandemic initially introduced uncertainty and delayed some transportation investments, subsequent federal and state funding actions provided a significant boost to post-pandemic infrastructure projects along the I-70 corridor and statewide. Major projects advanced during this period include the I-70 Vail Pass improvements and the \$700 million I-70 Floyd Hill project, both of which benefited from strengthened funding certainty following the pandemic.

Colorado leveraged multiple federal and state funding sources to sustain transportation investment during and after COVID-19. Federal relief legislation, including the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), provided dedicated funding for transit and infrastructure programs, helping agencies maintain services and advance capital projects that had been disrupted during the pandemic. In addition, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding supported long-term transportation priorities across the state. Through these programs, Colorado communities received more than \$42 million in federal transportation grants to support projects focused on improving mobility, safety, and economic outcomes.

Housing Impact

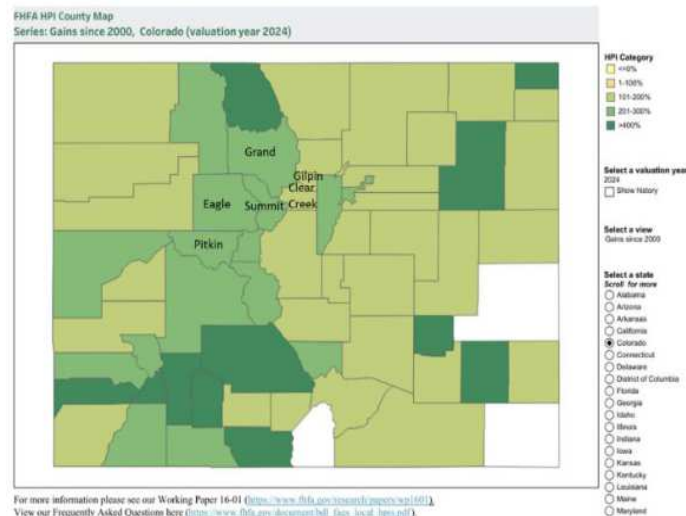
The I-70 Mountain Corridor is the main connection between Colorado's Front Range and its mountain resort communities, and access along it strongly shapes local housing. Housing conditions in the Mountain Resort Region¹ reflect a mix of long-standing patterns—including a well-established second-home and visitor-lodging market—and growing demand that has outpaced the supply of year-round, workforce-accessible housing. Second homes dominate the Mountain Resort Region, especially in Vail, Breckenridge, and Silverthorne, reducing year-round housing availability for workers and pushing many to live farther from job centers. Second homes account for roughly 60% of housing units in the Mountain Resort Region and forecasts project that second home inventory in key I-70 corridor counties will nearly double by 2035, underscoring the scale of the workforce housing challenge local communities are planning to address.

Short-term rentals (STRs) are closely associated with the region's housing pressures, though their role is best understood as part of a broader set of long-standing market dynamics. The STR market has existed in mountain communities for decades and reflects visitor demand that predates current affordability challenges. Rather than directly driving workforce housing shortages, STR demand competes with long-term rental supply in a housing market already constrained by high levels of second-home ownership and seasonal units. This adds to the planning challenge communities face as they work to secure workforce housing to support projected growth. Communities such as Breckenridge and Frisco have responded with licensing rules, caps, and higher fees, often paired with dedicated workforce housing programs. A recent HR&A and Airbnb study found that 30% of visitors to Eagle, Grand, Pitkin, Routt, and Summit Counties stayed in STRs. Across those five counties, approximately 59,500 housing units were classified as surplus, with more than 82% vacant for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use²—a figure that underscores the scale of the workforce housing planning challenge, even where STRs themselves are not the root cause.

¹ Northwest Colorado Council of Governments. (2004, June). *The social and economic effects of second homes*. <https://www.nwccog.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2004-Soc-Econ-Impac-of-2nd-homes.pdf>

² Airbnb, Inc. & HR&A Advisors. (2022, May). *Colorado short-term rental impact study: Eagle, Grand, Pitkin, Routt, and Summit Counties*. https://news.airbnb.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/06/STR-Colorado-Impact-Study_Final_05.25.2022.pdf

Rising housing costs force workers into longer commutes. According to FHFA Housing Price Index data, home prices in the Mountain Resort Region increased more than 200% between 2000 and 2024, with Summit County reaching almost 300% growth over the period. These longer commutes increase vehicle miles traveled along I-70, adding pressure during both weekday peaks and tourist seasons.



Ski areas across the corridor have also invested directly in workforce housing to help combat rising housing costs and recruit and retain seasonal staff. Loveland Ski Area, for instance, master-leases a converted motel in Idaho Springs to house a portion of its winter workforce, while Copper Mountain provides roughly 580 beds through its Edge development and another 130 through its two-phase Sky Chutes Landing project. These efforts illustrate how individual resorts are supplementing broader workforce housing strategies, even as regional supply constraints persist.

Congestion also affects tourism. Surveys show it reduces trip frequency, with one study finding that about 75% of respondents took fewer tourism trips due to traffic delays. Industry reporting in early 2025 shows a 10% decline in STR bookings, with occupancy rates softening compared with prior years^{3,4}. Some owners may respond by shifting units to long-term rentals or selling to absentee buyers, further reshaping the housing mix.

Demographic trends may introduce additional shifts over time. A significant share of second homes in mountain communities are owned by aging households. As these owners reconsider their ability or desire to maintain seasonal residences, turnover may increase. These properties may cycle to new second-home buyers, remain in families, or convert to STRs, offering limited benefit to the full-time workforce.

Overall, housing availability, commuting patterns, tourism demand, and corridor performance are tightly linked. Even as ownership patterns shift, peak-period demand for reliable access to the Mountain Resort Region will remain high.

³ Colorado Sun. (2025, August 4). *Colorado mountain tourism and short-term rental trends*.

<https://coloradosun.com/2025/08/04/colorado-mountain-summer-tourism>

⁴ Travel and Tour World. (2024, July 12). *Shifting short-term rental and hotel occupancy trends in Colorado*.

<https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/rising-taxes-and-shifting-tourism-trends-costra-prepares-for-upcoming-challenges-in-short-term-rental-market-of-colorado>

Health and Environment Impacts

Traffic congestion along the I-70 corridor affects health and environmental conditions across all three study regions, with impacts experienced by travelers, residents, and local communities. Prolonged exposure to congestion increases the duration and intensity of contact with vehicle emissions, noise, and travel-related stress, linking transportation conditions to public health outcomes.

Inside vehicles, slow or stop-and-go traffic can raise pollutant levels. Passenger cabins may accumulate carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, fine particulate matter, and VOCs, especially in warm, sunny conditions. Studies show carbon monoxide inside vehicles can exceed roadside levels, and other pollutants can rise depending on ventilation and vehicle design. Extended commute times also increase sedentary behavior, which is linked to higher cardiovascular and metabolic risk.⁵

Residents near high-traffic corridors face higher exposure to air pollution, increasing risks of asthma, respiratory and cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers. These effects can be amplified in mountain areas where terrain traps emissions. Congestion and travel disruptions further affect behavior and mental well-being, contributing to frustration, risky driving, and reduced local spending, with observations in the Mountain Corridor showing that delays make travelers less likely to stop in nearby communities or spend at local businesses.



⁵ Franssen, W. M. A., Nieste, I., Verboven, K., & Eijnde, B. O. (2025). Sedentary behaviour and cardiometabolic health: Integrating the potential underlying molecular health aspects. *Metabolism*, 170, 156320.

Local Environmental Impacts

When I-70 was completed through Glenwood Canyon in 1992, recreational infrastructure was integrated directly into the highway design. The project included scenic trails, rest areas, educational exhibits, paved bike paths, and river access points for rafting and kayaking. A paved bike path runs the length of the canyon, with ramps providing boaters access to the Colorado River. This section of I-70 is widely cited as one of the most environmentally sensitive highway projects in the United States, reflecting efforts to balance transportation infrastructure with recreation and environmental preservation.⁶

At the same time, transportation remains Colorado's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions and congestion along I-70 increases emissions of particulate matter, carbon monoxide, and other hazardous pollutants by extending vehicle idling and stop-and-go travel conditions. The U.S Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that a typical modern passenger vehicle emits approximately 575 pounds of carbon monoxide annually, with higher-emitting vehicles such as SUVs and trucks contributing more per mile traveled. Prolonged congestion amplifies these emissions, particularly during peak travel periods when traffic volumes are highest.

The state has adopted aggressive climate policies aimed at reducing tailpipe emissions through expanded electric vehicle (EV) adoption, stricter emission standards, and investments in multimodal transportation. Colorado has set statewide greenhouse gas reduction targets of 26% by 2025, 50% by 2030, and net-zero by 2050.⁷ Recent data indicate that EV adoption in Colorado continues to increase, with electric vehicles representing a growing share of new vehicle sales.^{8,9}

CDOT has implemented a range of operational strategies to manage congestion and reduce emissions along I-70, including Express Lanes, transit services such as Bustang, carpool incentives, and demand-management campaigns. Ongoing infrastructure improvements, including projects such as Floyd Hill, aim to enhance safety and traffic flow while incorporating modern technology to manage impacts. Over the long term, improvements

⁶ Colorado Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration.

⁷ Colorado House of Representatives. (2023). *House Bill 23-1233: Concerning energy efficiency, and, in connection therewith, requiring the state electrical board to adopt rules facilitating electric vehicle charging at multifamily buildings*. Colorado General Assembly. https://content.leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2023a_1233_signed.pdf

⁸ Force, T. (2024). *Multi-state ZEV Task Force Meeting Slides 11-21-2024.pdf*. Google Docs. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rcpeR9jOboSU_5gVs7GXV8fFLn_KwtgF/view?usp=drive_link

⁹ *Market Summary Forecast for State New Retail Light Vehicle Registrations*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 5, 2025, from <https://colorado.auto/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024-Colorado-Auto-Outlook-Q3.pdf>

that enhance traffic flow and support cleaner vehicle technology may reduce per-trip emissions and improve corridor efficiency.

Weather and Environmental Impact of Congestion and Traffic Patterns

I-70 is highly vulnerable to extreme weather, including wildfires, floods, snow, ice, and high winds, which frequently cause closures, traffic accidents, and delays. After the 2020 Grizzly Creek Fire, repeated flash floods and mudslides in 2021 shut down the corridor multiple times, stranding motorists, forcing long detours, and requiring extensive debris removal and road repairs. These events highlight how quickly severe weather can disrupt travel, increase crash risk, and strain Colorado's transportation infrastructure.

In contrast, low-snow and low-precipitation years on I-70 typically result in fewer weather-related delays from major storms, though congestion can still be significant due to holiday travel, construction, and peak ski weekends. Since the start of the 2026 water year on October 1, Colorado has experienced record warm temperatures and generally dry conditions. October and November were among the warmest on record, contributing to below-normal snowpack across all major river basins. As of January 1, 2026, statewide snow water equivalent was 56% of the long-term median, with 38% of long-term SNOTEL sites reporting record-low snowpack, particularly in central and northern mountain regions.¹⁰ These conditions alter travel patterns along the I-70 corridor, demonstrating that both extreme-weather events and below-normal precipitation can rapidly affect corridor performance and congestion dynamics.

More broadly, climate-related factors are increasingly shaping travel demand along I-70. Low-snow years driven by warmer winters can reduce ski visitation and concentrate trips into fewer favorable periods, intensifying congestion when conditions allow. Wildfires, smoke, and extreme heat disrupt summer recreation such as hiking, biking, and camping, reducing visitation and shortening stays. As mountain economies diversify beyond winter recreation, maintaining reliable year-round access along I-70 becomes increasingly critical to sustain tourism and economic activity under more volatile climate conditions.

¹⁰ Natural Resources Conservation Service. (2026, January 9). *Record low snowpack observed across much of Colorado heading into 2026*. U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/state-offices/colorado/news/record-low-snowpack-observed-across-much-of-colorado-heading-into-2026>.

Major I-70 Weather-Related Events

Several recent events illustrate how extreme weather, wildfires, and natural hazards can disrupt travel along the I-70 Mountain Corridor and create cascading economic and transportation impacts.

March 2019 Avalanche and Snowstorm (Vail to Frisco)

In March 2019, severe snowstorms and avalanche activity closed I-70 between Vail and Frisco for several days, burying parts of the highway, damaging infrastructure, and stranding travelers. That winter, avalanche control caused over 1,700 hours of closures on major routes, disrupting freight, forcing detours, and increasing congestion across Eagle and Summit Counties.

Grizzly Creek Fire (August 2020, Glenwood Canyon)

The Grizzly Creek Fire in 2020 closed I-70 through Glenwood Canyon for two weeks, forcing long detours and disrupting peak summer travel. Burned terrain increased later flood and mudslide risks, while local roads saw heavy congestion and restrictions. The closure strained regional travel and led to major revenue losses for nearby businesses, prompting \$116 million in recovery and resilience investments.

Burn Scar Debris Flows and Flash Flood Warnings (2021–2022, Glenwood Canyon)

Heavy rainfall over the Grizzly Creek Fire burn scar triggered repeated debris flows and flash-flood closures in 2021 and 2022. In 2021, mudslides buried sections of I-70 under up to 12 feet of debris, stranding motorists and requiring removal of about 3,300 truckloads. Multiple closures followed that summer, and additional storms in 2022 caused shorter but continued disruptions, affecting both passenger and freight travel.

Direct Economic Impact of Closures on Corridor Communities

Beyond their frequency, closures carry direct and measurable economic consequences for the businesses and communities along the corridor. CDOT's 2023–2024 Winter Impact Summary reported 222 safety closures along the I-70 Mountain Corridor, totaling 290 hours of full or partial closure. CDOT estimates that each hour of corridor closure carries an economic impact of roughly \$2 million, the majority of which affects surrounding communities. These disruptions vary widely in scale, including a March 14, 2024, storm event that forced a 90-mile commercial vehicle closure from Eagle to Morrison (mile marker 169 to mile marker 259), leaving hundreds of vehicles stranded.

By contrast, a 75-vehicle pileup near the EJMT on April 14, 2026, closed I-70 in both directions before eastbound lanes remained closed for approximately five hours, trapping visitors trying to leave the mountains even after westbound access reopened. The economic effects of these closures are not uniform: when travelers are prevented from reaching mountain communities, that spending is generally lost rather than deferred—a day visitor who turns back rarely reschedules the same trip. When closures instead trap visitors

already in the corridor, the opposite occurs: extended stays increase local spending on lodging, food, and services. Closures that briefly block both directions at once, as in the April 2026 event, can produce both effects simultaneously. Because the net effect depends on which direction is blocked, this report quantifies closure frequency and duration but does not model these directional variations—an important area for future research.

I-70 Incident Frequency and Trends

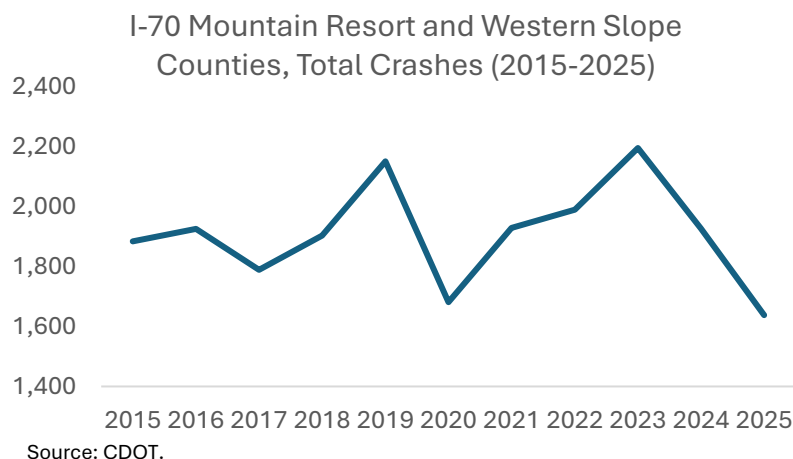
Beyond routine travel delays, the I-70 Mountain Corridor experiences persistent full and partial closures driven by distinct incident types, including weather-related stoppages, commercial vehicle jackknife crashes, severe multi-vehicle collisions, and planned maintenance activities. Aggregating incident data from Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) reports provides an empirical baseline to demonstrate the increasing frequency, location-specific nature, and growing duration of these disruptions across the corridor.

Incident Classifications and Location Variability

The operational and economic consequences of a closure vary significantly depending on its location and root cause. Crash activity along I-70 swings sharply year to year, underscoring that reliability issues stem primarily from incident severity and location. Because CDOT's crash data provides the most consistent insight into where and how incidents occur, it serves as a proxy for understanding closures: when crashes spike or occur in sensitive segments along I-70, shutdowns become longer and more frequent.

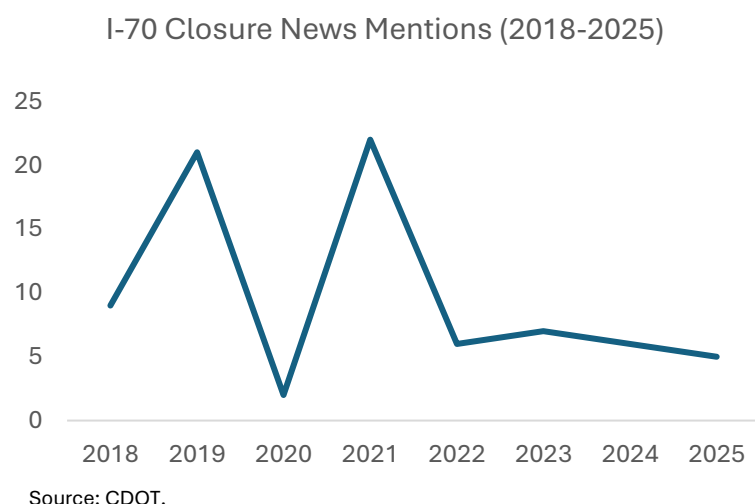
- **Location Vulnerability:** Structural bottleneck closures, such as severe weather or equipment failures at the EJMT, create immediate systemic gridlock, whereas open-highway closures along segments like West Vail Pass or Glenwood Canyon present distinct detour challenges and localized economic disruptions.
- **Incident Type:** Maintenance stoppages are generally planned during lower-volume windows, while winter weather events and commercial truck jackknives occur unpredictably during peak periods. The latter often trigger extended, multi-hour shutdowns due to the complex recovery operations required on steep mountain grades.

Crash totals across the Mountain Resort and Western Slope regions show a clear pattern of year-to-year volatility rather than steady growth or decline. Annual crashes range from a low of 1,638 in 2025 to a high of 2,196 in 2023, with multiple sharp swings in interim years. The corridor saw increases in 2016 (+42), 2018 (+115), and a notable jump in 2019 to 2,152 crashes, followed by a steep drop in 2020 to 1,681 (471). Crashes then rebounded in 2021 (+248) and climbed again in 2022 (+61) and 2023 (+206). The last two years show another decline, falling to 1,927 in 2024 and 1,638 in 2025. Over the full period, the data does not



form a consistent upward or downward trend; instead, it reflects recurring spikes and dips likely driven by driving conditions. These recurring spikes and dips align with well-known external factors—severe winter seasons, wildfire smoke periods, construction cycles, tourism surges, and pandemic-related travel disruptions.

Similarly, closure-related mentions along the I-70 Mountain Corridor and Western Slope in CDOT’s news posts fluctuate sharply from 2018 through 2025, closely tracking years with more operational disruptions. These mentions rose from 9 in 2018 to a peak of 21 in 2019, before falling to just 2 in 2020, reflecting reduced travel activity and fewer CDOT updates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mentions then rebounded to a decade high of 22 in 2021, consistent with the flash floods and mudslides that repeatedly shut down the corridor that year. Since 2021, closure-related mentions have declined and ranged from 5 to 7 annually between 2022 and 2025.

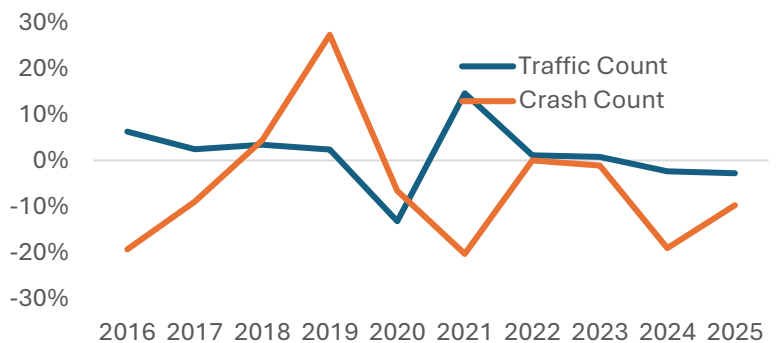


Across the Idaho Springs/Twin Tunnels, the EJMT, and the Glenwood Springs Tunnels—three of the highest-volume segments along the I-70 Corridor—the data shows a consistent pattern: traffic volumes shift only modestly year to year while crash activity fluctuates sharply. Glenwood Springs: daily traffic volume remains steady (around 18,000–20,000 vehicles), but crashes fluctuate unpredictably year-to-year without a clear single trajectory, ranging between 38 and 78 annually. EJMT daily traffic is consistent between 33,000 and 36,000 vehicles, yet crash numbers experienced heavy volatility—peaking at 128 crashes in 2022 before entering a sustained, multi-year decline down to 63 by 2025.

Idaho Springs / Twin Tunnels: Traffic volume reliably averages 50,000–54,000 vehicles daily. Crashes peaked in 2019 (121 crashes) and have followed a steady overall downward trajectory through 2025, reaching a decade low of 65. Idaho Springs/Twin Tunnels shows the same dynamic: traffic changes remain small—mostly within $\pm 3\%$ —but crashes still vary from 95 in 2018 to 121 in 2019 (+27.4%) before declining to 72 by 2024 (-19.1%).

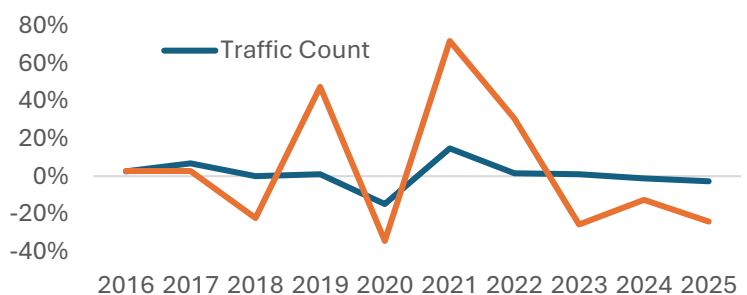
This volatility reinforces the broader corridor pattern: crash activity fluctuates substantially signaling that reliability challenges stem from incident severity, timing, and location. Years with elevated crash totals—such as 2019 and 2023—correspond to periods when closures and delays were more frequent, particularly in constrained segments like the EJMT and the Twin Tunnels. Conversely, lower-crash years do not necessarily eliminate closures, but they reduce the likelihood of long-duration, high-impact events. As a result, this combined-county crash dataset provides the most practical corridor-wide indicator of closure risk. When crashes rise sharply or cluster in sensitive areas, operational disruptions become more common and more economically consequential for mountain communities.

Idaho Springs/Twin Tunnel Total Traffic vs. Total Crashes, 2015 to 2025 (% Changes)



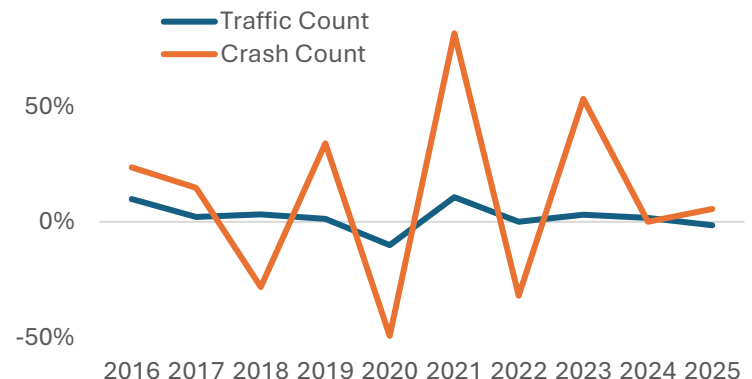
Source: CDOT.

EJMT Total Traffic vs. Total Crashes, 2015 to 2025 (% Changes)



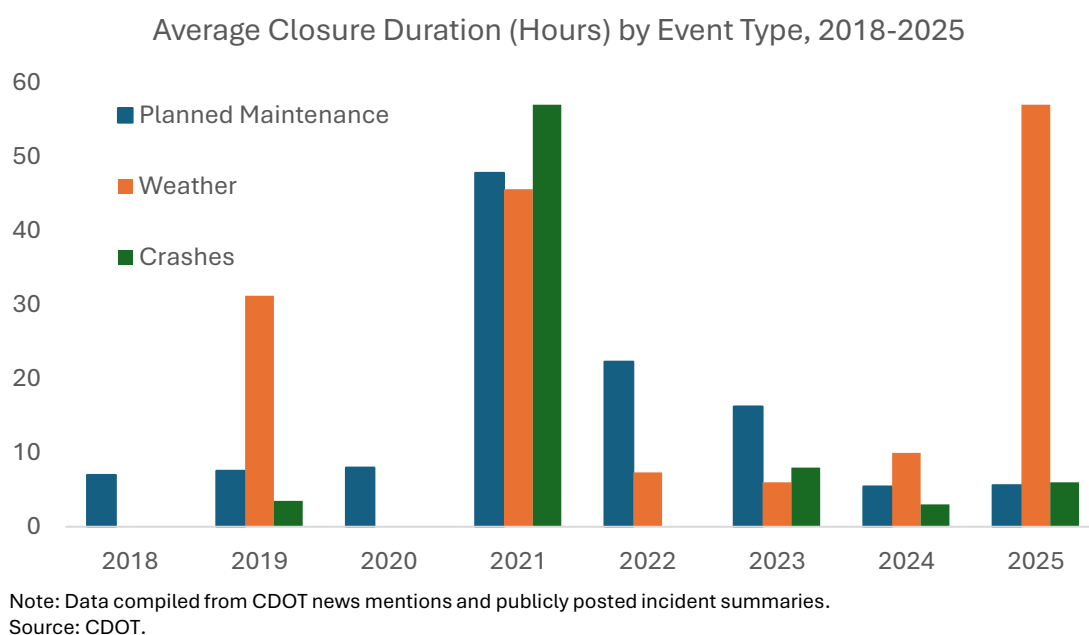
Source: CDOT.

Glenwood Springs Total Traffic vs. Total Crashes, 2015 to 2025 (% Changes)



Source: CDOT.

Closure-duration patterns across the corridor vary by year and by cause, reflecting how different operational pressures dominate during different periods. Planned maintenance closures are generally modest, averaging between 5 hours and 8 hours in most years, but rose substantially in 2021 (47.8 hours) and 2022 (22.3 hours), corresponding with periods of heavy construction and rehabilitation activity along the corridor. Weather-related closures follow a different pattern, with minimal impacts in 2018 and 2020 but a pronounced increase in 2019 (31.2 hours) and again in 2025 (57 hours), consistent with severe winter storm cycles affecting the corridor during those years. Crash-related closures show similar variability, remaining negligible in 2018 and 2020 but rising sharply in 2021 (57 hours) and ranged between 3 hours and 8 hours from 2023 to 2025.



Diversion Impact

Closures from events such as the 2020 Grizzly Creek Fire, the 2021 mudslides, and recurring flash-flood warnings in Glenwood Canyon disrupt traffic and push motorists onto detour routes like U.S. 40, CO 13, and CO 9. CDOT data from 2012–2015 show that nearly 600 incidents closed I-70 in at least one direction for more than 1,000 hours, with full closures accounting for about 125 hours. Key trouble spots include Vail Pass, Glenwood Canyon, the Eisenhower–Johnson Tunnel, and Silverthorne.

Detour routes are not built for interstate-level volumes, leading to slower travel, longer trip times, and higher crash risk. Detours via US-40 (Northern route) or Co-13 / US 50 (Southern route) can add roughly 2-3 hours of travel time for motorists. Communities along CO 13 and U.S. 40 often see sudden surges in truck and long-distance traffic, straining local infrastructure and safety resources. Freight delays and higher logistics costs add to the economic impacts, while traveler-oriented businesses may see short-term gains alongside congestion and infrastructure wear.

While diversions through communities such as New Castle, Rifle, Meeker, Craig, Steamboat Springs, Kremmling, Silverthorne, Basalt, Aspen, and Leadville can generate short-term revenue boosts, they can also bring safety concerns, added infrastructure strain, and localized gridlock.

Silverthorne, for example, a major junction for rerouted traffic, can see volumes exceed local roadway capacity, affecting emergency response and prompting projects like the Stevens Way widening. Recent events illustrate the scale. Repeated 2021 flash-flood closures, including a mudslide that trapped more than 100 motorists, led to I-70 being shut down for weeks. The 2020 Grizzly Creek Fire forced a two-week closure.

Comparison of 2007 and 2026 Reports

The original *Impact of I-70 Congestion on Colorado* report, completed in 2007, evaluated the economic implications of the “no-action” alternative under CDOT’s Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) and estimated annual congestion costs in 2005 dollars. The analysis relied on productivity-based measures to estimate business impacts, visitor spending to assess tourism effects, time valuation and vehicle operating costs to quantify resident impacts, and retail sales tax revenue to measure government impacts.

The updated analysis preserves those core methodological foundations to ensure continuity and comparability over time, while incorporating current data, refined assumptions, and expanded qualitative considerations that reflect today’s economic and transportation environment. By retaining the same analytical framework, meaningful comparisons can be made across nearly two decades of economic growth, population change, and evolving travel behavior.

Summary of the Impact of I-70 Congestion

Sector Impacted	Key Assumptions	Annual Estimated Cost		
		2007 Report (\$millions, 2005)	2026 Report (\$millions, 2025)*	2026 Report (\$millions, 2025)
Tourism	1% decrease in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region	\$25	\$44	\$47
Resident	Value of time lost due to congestion based on impacted travelers in Metro Denver, Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope	\$85	\$149	\$319
Business	0.5% loss of productivity and business efficiency in Metro Denver, Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope	\$728	\$1,278	\$1,882
Government	Loss of state, county, and city retail sales tax revenue associated with a 1% decrease in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region	\$1	\$2	\$2
Total Impacts		\$839	\$1,473	\$2,250

*2007 annual impact estimates were converted from 2005 dollars to 2025 dollars using the annual average CPI-U for the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood MSA, as published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This adjustment reflects inflation only and does not incorporate changes in traffic volumes, wages, GDP, or methodology.

To allow for an apples-to-apples comparison, the original 2005 estimates are first converted to 2025 dollars using the annual average CPI-U for the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood MSA. Adjusted for inflation alone, the original \$839 million annual impact is equivalent to approximately \$1.47 billion in 2025 dollars. The updated 2025 estimate of \$2.25 billion represents a 53% increase over the inflation-adjusted figure, reflecting real growth in congestion-related costs driven by higher wage levels, expanded visitation, increased traffic volumes, greater freight exposure, and longer and more frequent periods of delay. The gap between the inflation-adjusted estimate and the updated estimate illustrates that congestion impacts have grown in real terms, not simply as a result of inflation.

Final Analysis

Interstate 70 is a critical component of Colorado’s economic infrastructure, connecting Metro Denver, the Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope. The performance of this corridor influences tourism, workforce mobility, freight movement, public safety, and overall economic efficiency. Congestion along the I-70 Mountain Corridor represents more than a transportation inconvenience; it functions as an economic constraint, with measurable implications for productivity, tourism stability, freight reliability, and community well-being.

Under current conditions, total estimated congestion-related impacts reached \$2.25 billion annually in 2025, up from an estimated \$839 million in 2005. Even after adjusting for inflation, congestion costs have grown in real terms over the past two decades. This increase reflects structural changes in Colorado’s economy, including population growth, higher wage levels, expanded tourism activity, and increased freight volumes.

Concerns around I-70 congestion intersect with broader questions about growth capacity and sustainability in mountain communities. While tourism remains the economic lifeblood of the region, this report shows how workforce shortages, housing affordability, infrastructure limitations, and shifting weather trends complicate the relationship between congestion, tourism, economic performance, and the well-being of communities along the I-70 corridor. While this report does not propose a solution for these challenges, it demonstrates that as Colorado’s economy continues to expand, the importance of predictable, year-round corridor performance is increasingly central to both regional stability and statewide competitiveness.

Summary of the Impact of I-70 Congestion

Sector Impacted	Key Assumptions	(\$millions, 2025)
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Resident	Value of time lost due to congestion based on impacted travelers in Metro Denver, Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope	\$319
Business	0.5% loss of productivity and business efficiency in Metro Denver, Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope	\$1,882
Government	Loss of state, county, and city retail sales tax revenue associated with 1% decrease in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region	\$2
Total Impacts		\$2,250