

MOUNT WILSON INSTITUTE

Director's Office

c/o CHARA, Georgia State University
P.O. Box 1909
One Park Place, Suite 700
Atlanta, Georgia 30301-1909

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18 November 2009

To: Staff, visitors and residents of Mount Wilson Observatory
From: H.A. McAlister, Director
Subject: Mount Wilson Access and Transit Policy

Now that the winter rainy season is rapidly approaching, the Station Fire has left us vulnerable to potentially extended loss of access to the Observatory as a result of rock and mud slides that may block or even wash out portions of the Angeles Crest Highway. As a result of the high probability of such events, I am immediately instituting the following policy regarding Observatory access.

(1) For CHARA personnel or observers using the CHARA facilities, the CHARA Site Manager, Larry Webster, will have overriding authority to determine if road/weather conditions are safe to travel to or from the Observatory. Upon consultation with Dr. ten Brummelaar or me, Webster also has the authority to order an evacuation of CHARA personnel well ahead of any winter storm. For all non-CHARA personnel, this authority is invested in the Observatory Superintendent, Dave Jurasevich. I anticipate that any such decisions will involve the mutual consultation of Webster and Jurasevich.

(2) It is now mandatory that all road travel to and from the Observatory take place entirely during daylight hours. If for emergency reasons nighttime travel is required, it will only occur in clear weather conditions with 0% chance of forecast precipitation and in a team of two or more vehicles under strict oversight and advance approval of the Observatory Superintendent or CHARA Site Manager.

(3) Travel on the mountain roads is not allowed while there is any active precipitation (rain or snow, and no matter how light in nature) or within six hours of the predicted onset of such an event. If a life-threatening emergency does arise, call Los Angeles County and Forest Service authorities and follow their instructions. In any case, never drive into a downpour. Unless you are very close to your destination, turn around and go back.

(4) Drive well under the posted speed limit on the road as conditions may change instantly and unpredictably. Never drive onto a significant mudflow or rock slide. Sharp rocks flatten tires and mud has little or no traction. Also do not stop and clear rocks out of the road; small slides are often a portent of a much larger, more dangerous slide. If anything more than the most minor debris is encountered on the road, turn around and go back.

(5) All vehicles traveling to the observatory are required to be in good operating condition, and drivers are urged to fill their gas tanks before heading up the

Angeles Crest. At the very least, you must have a minimum of 1/2 tank of fuel before starting up. Your tire condition must be such that you have at least 1/8 inch of remaining tread on each tire and there is a serviceable spare tire and jack in your trunk.

(6) Understand that even in clear weather, one could become trapped between two large impassable rock slides. With the unstable mountain slopes, slides can occur at any time, not just during active rainfalls. With this in mind, all vehicles routinely traveling the roads should carry onboard enough provisions for an overnight stay on the highway without hope of rescue. For residents and commuting staff, a "survival kit" must be included in the vehicle containing items such as: sub-freezing clothing; gloves; a blanket; water; food; toilet paper; flashlight with good batteries; and a fully charged cell phone. For those with enough trunk space, a small flat shovel may also be handy. For transient visitors utilizing rental cars, consult with Jurasevich or Webster, as appropriate, to determine if you should be escorted up the mountain by an Observatory vehicle.

(7) Understand that by coming up to the Observatory there is always the possibility of becoming stranded there for an unscheduled extended stay. There have been instances when the skies have gone from clear blue to an outright cloudburst or snow storm in less than 30 minutes on Mount Wilson. Attempting to leave under such circumstances could have dire effects. A sudden freak storm like this could potentially close all access to and from the Observatory for as much as a 2- or 3-week period. Be sure you have extra food provisions for this, and the advance mental fortitude to "wait it out," if necessary, before committing yourself to an observing run.

(8) It is absolutely essential that all residents have a supply of food, medicines and other essentials that will last them through any significant stranding situation on the mountain. Thus, as a minimum, you should stock up a 3-week supply and pay careful attention to the weather forecast to properly time your resupply runs off the mountain. I take this very seriously, and residents who do not abide by this policy risk losing their mountain housing privilege.

(9) Access to the Observatory is governed by the regulations and restrictions set by Caltrans, the Forest Service, Los Angeles County and the CHP. It is essential that their regulations and all verbal instructions given you by their officers and representatives be followed scrupulously and that no attempt is made to circumvent them in any way.

We can expect to have a very trying five months ahead of us. The storm last week that resulted in multiple mud slides on the Angeles Crest and the stranding of one Observatory staff member in the middle of the night is undoubtedly just a prelude to what lies ahead.

I want to acknowledge Larry Webster's effort in substantially drafting this policy statement as well as Dave Jurasevich and Theo ten Brummelaar for their thoughtful input. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about this policy.

Sincerely,

