

# Ready for the mountains? Congress has other ideas

---

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

So here we go again.

Friday, the U.S. government runs out of money. Until a few days ago, it looked as though Congress would keep the lights on by passing a spending bill.

But the wheels on that bus are getting wobbly. What was once an unlikely government shutdown has become plausible.

As Politico reported late last week, negotiations hit a rough patch when the Trump administration began insisting on money for its wall along the Mexican border and immigration policies.

Democrats oppose both - and they want money to continue subsidizing private health insurance coverage under Obamacare.

Even if they patch together a short-term continuing resolution this week, a battle over raising the debt ceiling is coming up this summer. If Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador and his fellow House Freedom Caucus members dig in their heels, House Republicans won't have the votes to prevent the government from defaulting on its debt.

None of this ever goes well for Idaho. The last time the GOP Congress and the Obama White House deadlocked in the 2013 government shutdown, the Gem State discovered how exposed its economy can be to an interruption in federal spending.

Between the Idaho National Laboratory near Idaho Falls, university research and other government installations, the Gem State ranks among the top 10 in the amount of money it receives per capita from government contracts.

It's also in the top 10 in terms of spending per capita from small business loans.

The share of Idaho's workforce attributed to federal employees puts Idaho in the top half of states.

So the state's economic stability takes a hit every time its federal workers are furloughed.

However, north central Idaho and eastern Washington tend to ride out these storms because the budget dysfunction has struck at the end of the federal fiscal cycle each fall.

Now, however, the timing could pinch a winter-weary group of people who are eagerly contemplating a trip into the backcountry.

Consider, for instance, the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest. Located within it are about 3,000 miles of roads the public relies upon to access getaways.

The national forest is emerging from the heaviest winter in at least a decade. Snowpack in the Clearwater Basin is sitting at 122 percent of average.

A harsh winter and spring runoff are responsible for slides that have buried roads with debris. Elsewhere, roads located near streams and rivers have been washed out.

Nobody's certain how severe the damage is because much of the road network is still under snow.

Forest Service engineers will fan out to survey where roads need to be cleared or repaired. Then the staff has to reconcile limited resources to the scope of work that's going to be required.

All of which comes to a halt if Congress and the White House deadlock later this week and furlough non-essential federal employees such as Forest Service staffers.

Even if Forest Service employees are back at their jobs in a week, that's a week they can't recoup. As winter retreats, the Forest Service is bound to address conflicting demands. So some forest roads may not get the attention they need.

But don't blame the Forest Service for leaving your particular piece of heaven blocked by a washed-out road or a pile of debris.

If you value your summer vacation in north central Idaho's backyard, now's a good time to contact your member of Congress. - M.T.