

# Summer Repaving will Fix Glenn Highway Ruts

By Representative Dan Saddler

A few days ago, an Eagle River driver got on the Glenn Highway at North Eagle River, settled his pickup into one of the notoriously deep road ruts, and didn't have to touch his steering wheel until it was time to turn left on Gamble.

It's a great story -- and might even be true! Everyone lucky enough to live in our community and spend time driving the Glenn Highway knows about the terrible ruts in the roadway. They cause hydroplaning in the summer, skidding and sliding in the winter, and even in clear dry weather they can launch us out of our lane, with dangerous and sometimes deadly results.

The problem has gotten worse as ruts have gotten deeper. And the issue's come to a head after Anchorage Senator Cathy Giessel recently introduced her Senate Bill 50, suggesting a steep increase in the state studded tire tax, as a way to raise money to help pave roads damaged by ruts.

I wanted to offer some solid background information that should inform the discussion about the Glenn Highway rutting.

**What causes ruts?** There are many opinions as to what causes these ruts, including heavy semi-trucks, soft asphalt, studded snow tires and high traffic volume. But according to the Chief Engineer for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF), 90 percent of the blame for ruts can be laid squarely on use of studded tires. About 12 percent of the tires driven on Alaska roads are studded, based on the state's most current information, based on fee collections.

**How is the highway constructed?** The Glenn Highway is built of multiple layers. The bottom layer is about a foot of gravel and sand to allow drainage, and to provide more protection against freeze-thaw cycles than required in warmer climates. The next layer is four inches of gravel treated with asphalt containing about 3 percent oil. The top layer is a two-inch cap of asphalt of about 6 percent oil, and is the layer that experiences rutting.

**What's the repaving schedule?** As the most-traveled road in the state, the Glenn Highway is repaved on about a six-year cycle. DOTPF last repaved the Glenn Highway between Airport Heights Road and the Eklutna overpass in 2009, and from Eklutna to the Parks Highway interchange in 2010.

**Can't they use harder asphalt?** Studies in Scandinavia, validated in tests on Juneau's Egan Drive and Anchorage's Tudor Road, have shown that a harder asphalt is less susceptible to rutting. The material lasts about 60 percent longer, but costs about 18 percent more, because it must be shipped in from sources in Cantwell for Southcentral projects, or from British Columbia for Southeast work. DOTPF policy now justifies the more expensive, harder aggregate asphalt as costing less over the entire life cycle of a road.

**Is there hope for getting rid of the ruts?** Yes! The good news is that the Glenn Highway will be repaved this summer, using the harder aggregate asphalt. The section between Airport Heights Road and the Eklutna overpass will be repaved this summer. The Eklutna to Parks Highway interchange work will be done in late summer and fall. The projects will cost about \$15 million and \$12.6 million, respectively, with 90 percent coming from federal highway funds, and the state contributing the required 10 percent match.

I haven't yet talked with Senator Giessel to learn her exact motivation for introducing her studded tire fee bill. But I know her to be a clear-eyed conservative, with a good heart for her constituents. So I can't think she is trying to punish anyone, but offered the bill in good faith to make those causing most of the rutting problem pay most of the cost to fix it.

That said, however, I am probably as startled as anyone at the scope of the increase. A 1,500 percent hike in a user fee is shocking, and there should be no surprise at the public outrage. I cannot support the bill in its current form, and if the fee is not lowered or eliminated by the time it makes it to the House, I will work to make it more rational.

But work crews, equipment and asphalt cost money, and it has to come from somewhere, even if it's only our 10 percent share of the total. It will be up to citizens like you, expressing your thoughts through legislators like me, who must decide how we are to pay such costs. So, I would be glad to hear your ideas on funding sources for road maintenance, so that we can avoid the pain of such large increases in the studded tire fee.

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