THE COST OF CONGESTION

I-70 Mountain Corridor Impact Study 2026

Denver to Grand Junction

Quantifying the Economic, Workforce, and Quality-of-Life Impacts of Congestion Along Colorado's Most Critical East-West Corridor

WHY THIS REPORT MATTERS

I-70 serves as the primary connection between 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.

Western Slope

226K residents
Reliable access to Front Range markets is essential for business operations, workforce mobility, and economic stability.

Mountain Resort Region

132K residents
Congestion influences tourism demand, employee access, housing affordability, and seasonal economic activity.

Metro Denver

3.3M residents
Congestion affects leisure travel, goods movement, and regional economic efficiency.

This report does not propose a solution for congestion-related challenges. Instead, it shows that as Colorado's economy grows, reliable, year-round corridor performance is critical to regional stability and statewide competitiveness.

KEY FINDINGS

$47M

Annual Tourism Revenue at Risk

A 1% decline in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region.

$319M

Value of Resident Time Lost

Value of personal time lost to I-70 delays across all three regions.

$1.9B

GDP Impact from Productivity Loss

A 0.5% decline in worker productivity and business efficiency.

$2M

Government Impact

Loss of sales tax revenue associated with a 1% decrease in tourism spending in the Mountain Resort Region.

$2.25B

Total annual cost of congestion

- Up from $839M in 2005
- 53% real increase after adjusting for inflation.

Source: Metro Denver EDC analysis, 2026. All figures in 2025 dollars.

KEY FINDINGS

$2.3M/hr

Tourism spending in Mountain Resort Region at risk due to corridor closure

Up from $800K/hour in 2005.

$2M

Added shipping costs for local mountain businesses due to I-70 congestion

Total added shipping costs due to congestion-related delays exceeds $44M annually.

$30B

Estimated capital improvement cost

Each year construction is delayed compounds this figure. Annual maintenance alone exceeds $44M.

Extreme Weather Events

Extreme weather events including wildfires and floods can cause closures, delays, and safety risks that strain transportation infrastructure and alter travel patterns.

Housing Dynamics

Rising prevalence of second-homes and short-term rentals in Mountain Resort Region drive up housing costs and limit workforce housing availability, requiring many workers to commute longer distances on I-70 corridor.

Traffic Diversions

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.

Source: Metro Denver EDC analysis, 2026. All figures in 2025 dollars.

SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

- This study updates the original 2007 report, maintaining the same analytical framework to ensure comparability across nearly two decades of economic growth, population change, and evolving travel behavior.
- Analysis quantifies the costs of inaction assuming no major capacity or operational improvements.
- Added analysis reflects emerging challenges including COVID impacts, housing constraints, STR dynamics, and climate/weather exposure.
- Both qualitative and quantitative impacts are assessed throughout.

Impact Categories Assessed

Tourism
Visitation patterns, travel behavior, recreation spending

Residential & Workforce
Commuting patterns, workforce accessibility, housing market dynamics

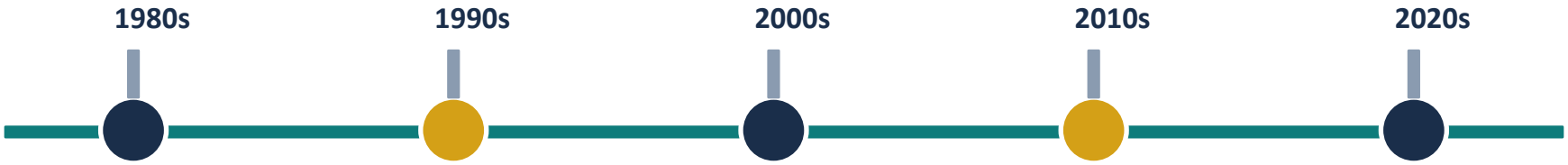
Business Community
Labor availability, freight reliability, business operating costs

Government
Emergency services, transportation operations, infrastructure demands

Construction & Infrastructure
Deferred improvement costs, escalating construction timelines

HISTORY OF THE I-70 CORRIDOR

Despite decades of investment, travel demand has grown faster than available capacity, leading to persistent and worsening congestion.



1980s — Major investment era begins

- Colorado initiates series of safety, mobility, and environmental protection improvements along the I-70 Mountain Corridor.

1990s — Glenwood Canyon completed

- One of the most environmentally sensitive highway projects in U.S. history, integrating trails, river access, and scenic infrastructure into the design.

2000s — Corridor Planning and Capacity Improvements

- Interchange upgrades and lane improvements.
- CDOT's PEIS developed.

2010s — Traffic Management and Express Lanes

- Completion of Twin Tunnels widening.
- Opening of I-70 Mountain Express Lane.
- Improved traveler info and weather monitoring.

2020s — Corridor Modernization

- Major corridor projects advance, including Floyd Hill and Vail Pass improvements.
- Ongoing repairs and modernization of EJMT.

COLORADO LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS AFFECTING I-70

2017–2025

Policies aimed at improving transportation funding, safety, and operational reliability along major highway corridors

2017 — **HB17-1242**

Statewide ballot measure for transportation revenue, including I-70 capacity relief.

2017 — **SB17-267**

Authorized CDOT lease-purchase financing to accelerate capital-intensive corridor projects.

2018 — **SB18-001**

Established recurring General Fund transfers for highway maintenance, bridges, and operations.

2021 — **SB21-260**

Created dedicated transportation funding ($5B+ over 10 years). Enabled Floyd Hill, tunnel work, and mountain corridor reliability investments.

2022 — **HB22-1074**

Clarified enforcement of peak-period shoulder lanes and express lane use on I-70; civil penalties for improper use.

2024 — **SB24-100**

Strengthened chain law and winter safety enforcement on I-70. Expanded CMV requirements Sept 1–May 31; stricter passenger vehicle traction laws.

2025 — **SB25-069**

Created permit system for third-party vendors to sell and install chains at designated sites along the corridor.

2025 — **SB25-320**

Updated CMV statutes for regulatory clarity and freight movement consistency on key corridors including I-70.

BASE TRAFFIC CONDITIONS: KEY MONITORING LOCATIONS

Three locations monitor traffic conditions along the I-70 Mountain Corridor, representing Metro Denver, the Mountain Resort Region, and the Western Slope. While volumes are highest near Metro Denver, the fastest growth has occurred on the Western Slope.

Idaho Springs (Twin Tunnels)

Metro Denver Segment

Highest absolute volume on the corridor. Key bottleneck for Front Range recreational traffic.

51,000	+10.9%	+19.9%	1.0% / yr
Avg Daily Traffic	Growth 2015–2025	Growth 2005–2025	Avg Annual Growth

Eisenhower–Johnson Memorial Tunnel

Mountain Resort Region Segment

Highest point on the U.S. Interstate System. Single-point failure risk and closures that affect the entire corridor.

34,000	+7.0%	+20.6%	0.7% / yr
Avg Daily Traffic	Growth 2015–2025	Growth 2005–2025	Avg Annual Growth

Glenwood Springs

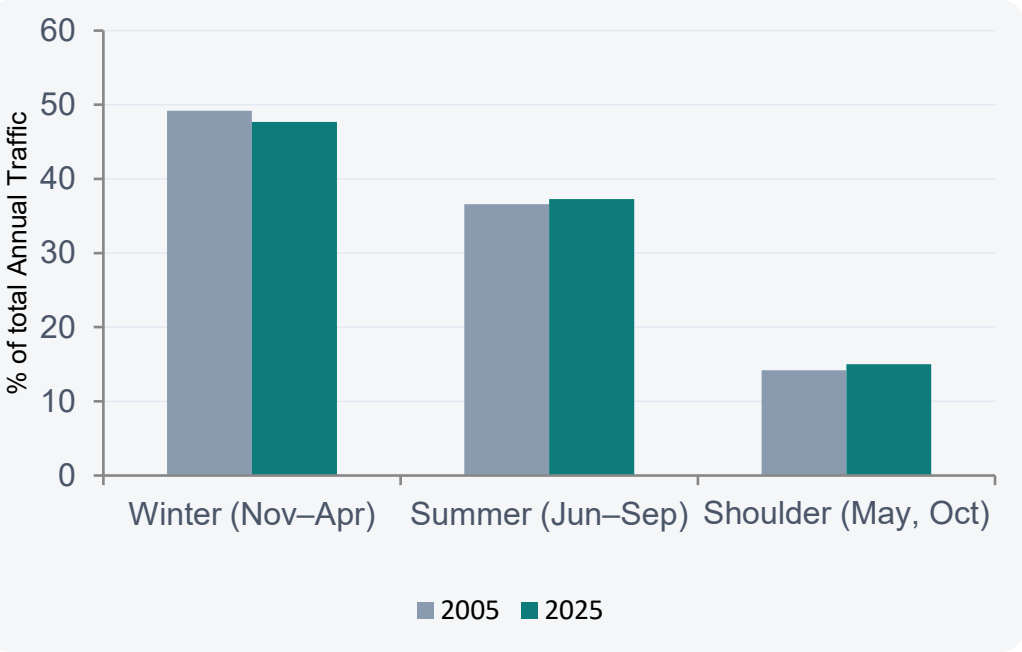
Western Slope Segment

Fastest-growing location. Vulnerable to Glenwood Canyon closures, impacting the east-west route for most through-traffic.

19,000	+20.7%	+22.1%	1.9% / yr
Avg Daily Traffic	Growth 2015–2025	Growth 2005–2025	Avg Annual Growth

Source: CDOT.

BASE TRAFFIC CONDITIONS: SEASONAL PATTERNS



Winter · Nov – Apr

6M vehicles

+12.7% vs 2005 (+1M vehicles). Most severe congestion coincides with ski weekends, holidays & school breaks.

Summer · Jun – Sep

4.7M vehicles

+18.5% vs 2005. Driven by Front Range heat, outdoor recreation & holiday weekends (July 4th, Labor Day).

Shoulder · May & Oct

1.9M vehicles

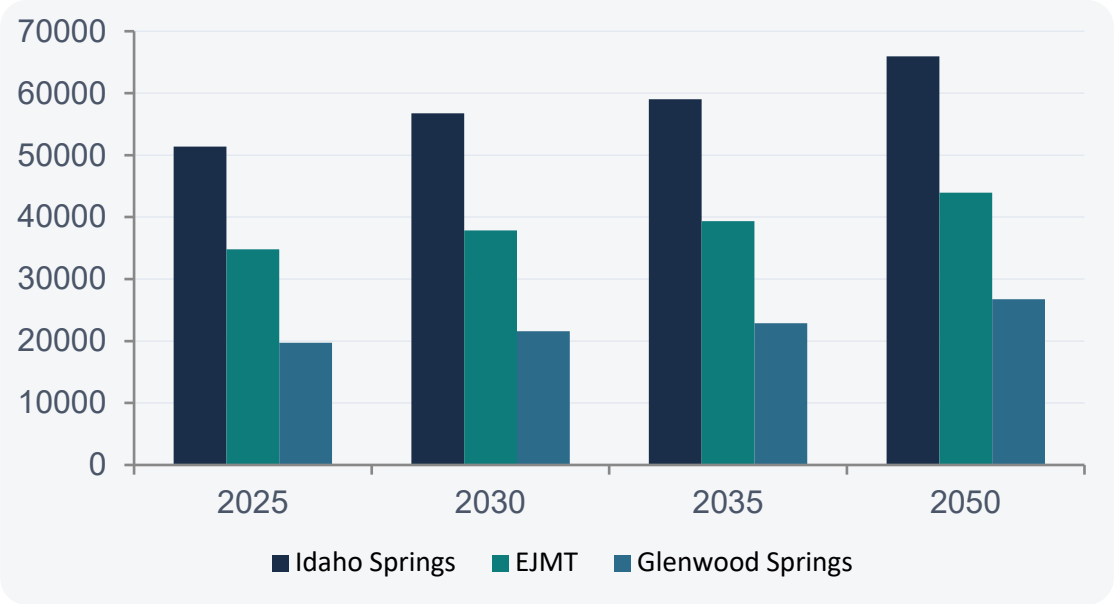
+22.9% vs 2005 (the fastest-growing season). 30K vehicles/day, increasing year-round usage of the corridor.

Source: CDOT.

Overall traffic volumes are higher in summer, but the most severe congestion occurs in winter due to weather, ski travel concentration, and narrower time windows.

BASE TRAFFIC CONDITIONS: FORECAST 2025–2050

Traffic volumes are projected to rise steadily through 2050 — with Glenwood Springs growing fastest (+35.5%) and Idaho Springs reaching 65,900 vehicles per day. Colorado's population is expected to grow by 1M+ by 2050, concentrated along the Front Range.



Average Daily Traffic by Location & Year (CDOT projections)

Projected Growth vs 2025 Baseline

Location	By 2030	By 2035	By 2050
Idaho Springs	+10.5 %	+14.9 %	+28.3%
EJMT	+8.7%	+13.1 %	+26.3%

+40%

Regional vehicle miles traveled projected increase by 2050 (DRCOG travel demand model)

Source: CDOT; Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), 2025; Colorado State Demography Office.

TOURISM IMPACT: RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES & VISITOR SPENDING

Colorado's I-70 corridor is the gateway to one of the nation's most productive outdoor recreation economies. Congestion puts this economic engine at risk by discouraging visitation, shortening stays, and redirecting spending.

❄ Winter (Nov – Apr)

13.8M	Skier visits in 2024–25 — 3rd-busiest season on record
17 of 28	Colorado ski resorts directly accessible via I-70
22–23%	Colorado's share of all U.S. skier visits
$18.1B	Snow activities' contribution to Colorado GDP (2024)

☀ Summer (Jun – Sep)

7.2M	National park visitors in Colorado (2024)
$210M	Economic impact of Colorado's rafting industry (2024)
$2.4B	Annual motorized recreation expenditures statewide
54	Fourteener peaks — 12 in the Mountain Resort Region

Sources: Colorado Tourism Office; Colorado Ski Country USA; BEA Outdoor Recreation Statistics; Colorado River Outfitters Association; National Park Service.

TOURISM IMPACT: VISITOR SPENDING, LODGING & TRAVEL ALTERNATIVES

$29.5B

Total Colorado visitor expenditures (2024)

95.4M visitors statewide

$4.7B

Visitor spending in Mountain Resort Region

16.5% of total Colorado visitor spending

$780M

Visitor spending on the Western Slope

~3% of statewide travel spending

Lodging Costs & Congestion Effects

$747 / night	Avg Vail winter lodging rate 2024–25 (+52% vs 2014)
27%	Share of domestic overnight spending on lodging ($594/person/trip)
35.5%	Mountain Resort Region retail sales from visitor spending

⚠ *Congestion has mixed lodging effects: may discourage day trips (reducing demand) but encourage overnight stays for those already in the region.*

Travel Alternatives to I-70

Commercial Air
4 corridor airports. Fly-in visitors often stay longer & spend more, but only make up about 7% of overnight trips

Bustang / Snowstang / Local Transit
Bustang West Line carried 99,800 riders (2024, +11%). Snowstang transported ~8,000 skiers winter 2024.

Rail
Winter Park Express Ski Train: 43,919 riders in 2025 (+153% YoY). Amtrak Zephyr serves Glenwood Springs (36,853 riders, FY2024).

Alternatives ease pressure but cannot replace I-70. Personal vehicles account for 93% of overnight trips to Colorado.

Sources: Longwoods International; Dean Runyan Associates; NWCCOG; Vail Valley Partnership; Amtrak.

RESIDENT IMPACTS

$319M

Annual value of personal time lost to I-70 congestion

Regional Breakdown of Congestion Travel-Time Costs

Metro Denver — **$293.5M**

60 min delay/trip | $43.22/hr | 6.8M persons/yr

Mountain Resort Region — **$20.2M**

10 min delay/trip | $31.14/hr | 3.9M persons/yr

Western Slope — **$5.4M**

10 min delay/trip | $28.58/hr | 1.1M persons/yr

Plus: vehicle wear costs, sunk costs of cut-short recreation, and compounding losses from repeated peak delays.

BUSINESS IMPACT

$1.9 Billion

Annual decline in Colorado GDP from just a 0.5% productivity loss due to congestion-related factors across 2 million employees

Labor & Productivity

- Unreliable commutes reduce productivity, increase fatigue, and drive turnover.
- Mountain Resort Region employers increasingly subsidize workforce housing as congestion widens the gap between job centers and affordable housing.

Freight & Supply Chain

- 159,000+ truck delay hours in 2024. Congestion adds $14M in annual shipping costs ($2M for mountain businesses).
- Mountain communities face acute supply disruptions. Limited storage capacity means frequent, time-sensitive deliveries are essential.

Talent Recruitment

- Colorado's mountain access is a key employer recruitment tool. Worsening congestion undermines this advantage, increasing pressure on wages, relocation packages, and employer-sponsored housing programs.

Mountain Resort Region tourism-related transactions: $2.3M per workday hour. This economic impact is at risk with any reduction in reliable visitor flow.

GOVERNMENT IMACT

Fiscal Impacts

8%	percent of state accidents that occurred along I-70 mountain corridor (2024)
34%	Research shows congestion increases peak-hour crashes by 34%
$60.8M	Estimated cost to society of fatal crashes along I-70.

The Cost of Delay

$2.3 Million

annual sales tax revenue loss from a 1% tourism spending decline

Congestion also burdens emergency services, workforce housing programs, and government employee recruitment along the corridor.

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Emerging pressures compounding I-70 congestion impacts:

Housing Crisis

- 60% of Mountain Resort Region housing is second homes.
- Home prices are up 200–300% since 2000.
- Workers commute longer distances, worsening congestion in a feedback loop.

Climate & Weather

- Wildfires, floods, and low-snow years increasingly disrupt travel.
- Jan 2026 snowpack at 56% of median, concentrating ski season to a shorter window.
- Both extreme events and shifting weather trends alter corridor demand unpredictably.

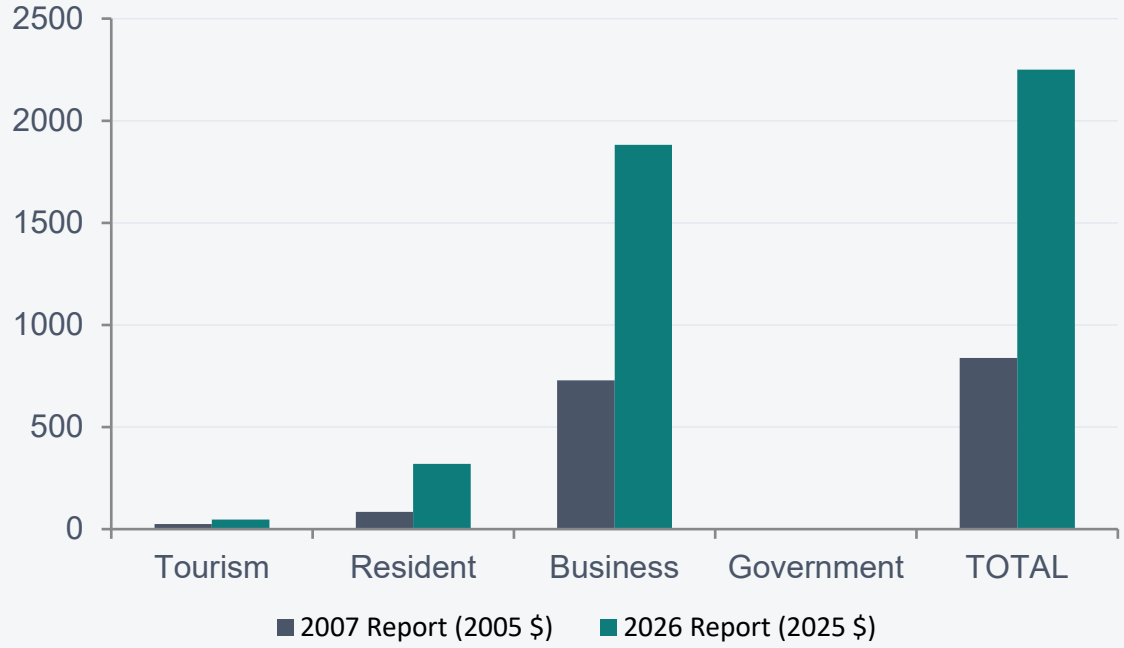
Diversion Risks

- I-70 closures push traffic onto US-40, CO-9, CO-13.
- These routes are not built for interstate volumes.
- Communities face sudden surges, safety risks, and infrastructure strain.

Health & Environment

- Congestion raises in-vehicle pollutant exposure, emissions, and travel stress.
- CO2 and particulate matter worsen during stop-and-go conditions on mountain grades.

THEN VS. NOW: 2007 TO 2026



Annual Impact Estimates: 2007 vs 2026 ($ millions)

Key Takeaways

+168% Growth in total impact (inflation-adjusted)

+275% Growth in resident time-loss costs

+47% Tourism impact more than doubled

Real costs — not just inflation — have grown. Higher wages, more travelers, greater freight volume, and longer/more frequent delays all drive the increase.

TOTAL ESTIMATED ANNUAL COST OF CONGESTION

$2.25 Billion

annually — and rising. Up 53% from the inflation-adjusted 2007 estimate.

Tourism	1% decline in Mountain Resort spending	$47M
Resident Time Loss	Value of congestion delays across all three regions	$319M
Business Productivity	0.5% productivity loss across ~2M employees	$1,882M
Government Revenue	Sales tax loss from 1% tourism spending decline	$2M
TOTAL		**$2,250M**

Metro Denver EDC

FINAL ANALYSIS

I-70 congestion is not merely a transportation inconvenience. It functions as an economic constraint with measurable consequences for every sector of Colorado's economy.

01 Congestion costs have grown in real terms, not just due to inflation. This increase largely reflects population growth, higher wages, and expanded tourism volumes.

02 The costs of delayed construction compounds over time. Construction estimates now reach $30B.

03 Congestion is embedded in a broader system of structural challenges including housing, workforce, climate, and diversion pressures are all interlinked.

04 Reliable year-round corridor performance is increasingly central to Colorado's regional stability and statewide competitiveness.