

Bumpy road for Ridge Route group

[Ridge, from A21] traffic well into the 21st century.

But the Forest Service closed the 20-foot-wide road to the public in 2005 after heavy rains washed out parts of it. Federal officials later spent millions of dollars to repair the damage and repave 1½ miles of the road. It is now passable, although some areas remain unpaved because of recent pipeline relocation projects conducted by petroleum and gas companies whose lines run parallel to the road.

Nonetheless, Angeles National Forest officials — who have jurisdiction over the mountains that are crossed by the Ridge Route — have not reopened the 30-mile stretch, which zigzags along mountaintops between Castaic and Highway 138 near Gorman.

Officials also won't allow members of the nonprofit Ridge Route Preservation Organization to use mechanized equipment to clean out culverts and remove rocks that occasionally tumble onto the roadway, said Scott, though as the group's president, he has been given a key to the roadway's gate.

And they have balked at designating the road a National Forest Scenic Byway, according to Scott. That designation is a preliminary step in getting it named a National Scenic Byway, recognition that in the past would have freed up federal funding for things like guardrails, signage and a Ridge Route interpretive center, he said.

What repair and maintenance is now performed on the road is apparently done solely by the 150 or so members of Scott's organization.

"We're an older group of volunteers, in our 60s, 70s and 80s," said Mike Simpson, secretary of the preservation group. "We go up with shovels and wheelbarrows and clean out drains. It would be very helpful if we could use a Bobcat instead of having five or six guys shoveling dirt into a wheelbarrow."

The volunteers use sledgehammers to break up



RICK LOOMIS Los Angeles Times

THOUGH SOME areas remain in disrepair, most of the scenic Ridge Route north of Los Angeles is now passable. The preservation group says the Forest Service is dragging its feet about reopening the historic roadway.

steamer-trunk-sized boulders that sometimes fall onto the road where it slices through a steep ridge at a place called Swede's Cut.

Simpson, 55, lives in Seal Beach and is a legal assistant with DirecTV. Since learning of Scott's preservation efforts, he has spent nearly 10 years helping out during monthly Ridge Route work days.

Scott and Simpson said frustration with the Forest Service has grown to the point that the group's board of directors may be asked later this month to approve disbanding the Ridge Route Preservation Organization.

"We can't even shove a spade of dirt over the side of the road" because of the agency's rules, said Scott, a 77-year-old retired Pacific Bell engineer who lives in

Torrance and discovered the Ridge Route as a teenager in 1955 when he took his first car out for a spin.

Scott says his group was criticized for performing emergency repairs to a concrete stairway at the Ridge Route's 22-mile mark, the site of what 87 years ago was known as the Tumble Inn. It was a collection of stone structures that featured \$2-per-night rooms, a restaurant and a Richfield gas station.

Off-road motorcyclists had damaged a staircase that once led to the sleeping rooms, and Scott's volunteers attempted to stabilize it to prevent the concrete steps from completely collapsing. Angeles National Forest officials complained in a letter to the state Office of Historic Preservation of

the "inappropriate rehabilitation measures by a volunteer group."

The preservation organization also commissioned plans from a registered engineer that they could use in conjunction with an Eagle Scout from Santa Clarita to rebuild a stone archway that once stood at the top of the Tumble Inn steps. Although the Forest Service had earlier approved those plans, Scott's group was told last month that officials now "don't know that we can let you do it," he said.

The Forest Service's alleged foot-dragging over the scenic byway designation is particularly galling to Scott and Simpson. They speculate that the cash-strapped federal agency may be unnecessarily worried that such a label might require it

to spend money on Ridge Route's maintenance.

"They promised years ago they would support the designation," Scott said. "But they're stonewalling. They say, 'We just don't have the money.' The road has to be open in order to get the National Forest Scenic Byway designation."

Simpson said the scenic byway label "wouldn't require any more" from the Forest Service than its blessing and could free up money for maintenance from other federal sources. "Scotty got the Ridge Route named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1997," he pointed out.

The criticism has jarred Angeles National Forest officials.

Acton-based District Ranger Bob Blount said he

Damaged path

The historic Ridge Route has been closed since heavy rains damaged it in 2005.



Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas
LORENA ELEBEE Los Angeles Times

would try to discourage Scott and Simpson from disbanding the Ridge Route group. He said the roadway might reopen to the public later this year after the utility companies undertake a \$10-million slope-shoring project that will protect both their pipelines and the pavement at Osito Canyon, near the road's halfway point.

"I look forward to working with the utility companies and potentially the state to hopefully come up with some funds so the road can be maintained," Blount said Friday. His agency is also "looking at what the Scouts are proposing to do" at the Tumble Inn site. Blount voiced support for the National Scenic Byway designation and said he is willing to ease the ban on mechanized equipment on days when there is not a high fire danger along the road.

"I love Harrison Scott," Blount said. "The Forest Service appreciates a great deal the valuable work he and his group have done. I certainly hope they hang in there."

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