

Packs of lone commuters turned back

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SANTA CRUZ — Hundreds of over-the-hill commuters were turned away Monday as the Highway Patrol launched a get-tough policy prohibiting solo drivers on Highway

17. Commuters were ordered to either double up to drive over the earthquake-damaged mountain pass between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos Monday, or take another route. The prohibition is expected to continue through Nov. 20.

Highway Patrol Capt. Steve Ellis estimated that 10-15 percent of Monday's commuters were driving alone and, therefore, were turned back. It's estimated that 23,000 Santa Cruz County residents commute to the Santa Clara Valley daily.

At one point, the backup at the checkpoint was more than a mile, Ellis said, and the evening commute in Los Gatos was even worse.

"Every solo driver, in fact, has some sort of story," Ellis said. "But, it's really difficult for our officers to be even marginally polite. We don't want to be rude, but we just don't have time to listen."

Car pools of two or more persons only are being allowed in Highway Patrol-led convoys between 5 a.m. and 9 a.m., and 3 p.m. and 7 p.m., seven days a week. Trucks are allowed to cross in convoys between 8 p.m. and 4 a.m.

The only exceptions to the solo-driver prohibition are Summit-area residents, and buses and emergency vehicles, which are permitted at all times.

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The new rules were instituted because of the massive job facing California Department of Transportation crews in clearing numerous landslides left from the Oct. 17 earthquake. Convoys, which had been running 24 hours a day until Sunday, were causing crews too many problems, Ellis said.

Hector Corona, a supervisor with Raisch Construction, which is working to clear the massive landslide at Laurel Curve, said they are shooting for Nov. 20 to have two lanes of Highway 17 open to convoys 24 hours a day. A Dec. 15 date is targeted for the highway to be fully open again.

The primary alternate route to Highway

17 continues to be Highway 9, although Bear Creek Road in Boulder Creek is restricted to residents only. Highway 9, which had been closed four miles north of Boulder Creek, is now fully open.

Like Bear Creek Road, Old Santa Cruz Highway via Old San Jose Road and Summit Road are also restricted to residents only.

Other alternates include: Highway 1 north to Half Moon Bay and Highway 92 to Interstate 280; Highway 1 north to Highway 84 and east on Highway 84 to Interstate 280; Highway 1 south to Highway 152 in Watsonville to Highway 101; and Highway 1 south to Salinas Road and then to Highway 101 via San Juan Road.

Highway 129, which has been closed for normal maintenance, is expected to reopen Nov. 6.

Meanwhile, dozens of special buses are operating daily from a new park-and-ride lot at the former Santa's Village in Scotts Valley. The buses go to the downtown San Jose Caltrain Depot, San Jose State University or a park-and-ride lot at Camden Avenue and Branham Lane in southwest San Jose.

Also, a special passenger train, running

daily from Watsonville through San Jose to San Francisco, continues to increase ridership from south county. Monday, 127 rode the train, compared to 101 on Friday. The train now leaves San Jose for Watsonville at 5:30 p.m. instead of 4:50 p.m., arriving in Watsonville at 6:40 p.m.

For information about bus routes over the hill, call 425-8600. For Caltrain information, call 1-800-558-8661. Bus fares are \$2 one way, while the train is \$3 from Watsonville one-way, or \$4.50 round trip.

Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen said some 700-900 new car poolers have been added in the past two weeks. Commuters can be instantly matched by calling 429-POOL.

Car poolers may park free at the former Santa's Village park-and-ride lot, as well as on Mt. Hermon Road and Whispering Pines Drive in Scotts Valley, and at the Capitola Beach shuttle lot at McGregor Drive and Park Avenue.

The Caltrain Connector and Airporter buses are also using Highway 17, as are Greyhound and Peerless.