

Yosemite National Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



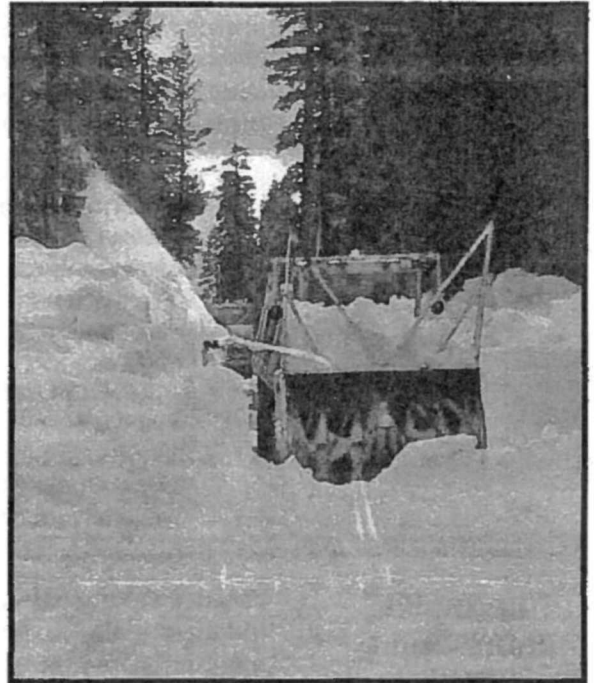
Tioga Road—Frequently Asked Questions

"...its many miles of unexcelled scenic grandeur have fulfilled the desires, the deep-felt longing for a contact with nature's wilderness, even the dreams of many thousands who have passed over its often twisting, ever-changing course." – Keith Trexler, 1961

The Tioga Road is the continuation of California Highway 120 that winds through Yosemite National Park from Crane Flat to Tioga Pass, the park's eastern boundary. It then drops down Lee Vining Canyon to Highway 395 in the Mono Basin. Caltrans manages the road outside the park, and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) provides many camping and recreational services along that 12-mile stretch.

Animal trails, American Indian trade routes, mining explorations, and early wagon roads preceded today's Tioga Road, which has since become one of the most popular routes across the Sierra Nevada. As the highest trans-Sierra pass, it was designed for leisure travel with many overlooks and interpretive opportunities.

For public safety, this road is closed each year with the coming of winter snow. The Tioga Road crosses several avalanche paths, making snow removal during the winter extremely dangerous. Even if plowing were attempted, winter conditions along this road make for very hazardous driving.



Plowing operations along the Tioga Road

Why does the Tioga Road close in winter?

Winters in Yosemite's high country are harsh, with snow dozens of feet deep as late as April. Snow may begin accumulating as early as October, and new snow is still possible even in May and June. Snow persists until April at elevations as low as 6,000 feet. Tioga Pass, the highest point along the Tioga Road, is at 9,945 feet.

When is the Tioga Road open?

The Tioga Road typically opens in late May or early June and remains open usually through October and into November. Since the road's opening and closing depends on weather and snow conditions, it is not possible to predict these specific dates. The road rarely opens prior to mid-May and seldom remains open beyond late November. The latest opening in recent years was on July 1 (1998); the earliest closure was October 17 (2004).

Why can't I park my car overnight along the road after October 15th?

The first big winter storms often arrive at this time of year. Once the Tioga Road receives enough snow, it can remain closed until the following spring. Beginning October 15, it is prohibited to leave vehicles unattended at any time from sunset to sunrise along the Tioga Road. This includes trailheads or other areas accessible from the Tioga Road. This restriction prevents the vehicles of overnight users from being buried in deep snow for the entire winter.

Why don't you plow the road during winter?

The Tioga Road corridor contains over two dozen avalanche zones, making snow removal during the winter difficult and extremely dangerous for employees and visitors alike. Even if plowing was attempted would remain very icy, requiring prodigious amounts of sand to improve traction; accidents would be common, regardless.

How early does the road open in the spring?

Spring opening operations begin after April 14. However, predicting when the road will open is not possible, even in late spring, because weather in April and May can affect plowing progress significantly. The opening of the road in the spring depends not just on plowing, but also on many other factors. Safety is the primary concern—both for employees working on the road and for visitors driving the road after it opens. Some of the factors that affect when the road will open are:

- Avalanche zones (26 potential areas). The Olmsted Point avalanche zone requires a lot of work, including application of charcoal over the snow to help with melting and blasting the snow slab to make it safer for personnel.
- Heavy snowpack slows the whole operation.
- Trees that have fallen across the road and been buried in the snow. These can cause substantial damage to the equipment and result in a stop to all operations until they're cleared.
- Rockslides buried by the snow. These can cause substantial damage to the equipment and result in a stop to all operations.
- Snowstorms during the opening require a stop to Tioga Road operations in order to plow and sand the park roads that are already open.
- Road repairs, ditching, and brushing operations once snow has melted back enough.

The road is open—why aren't the facilities open?

Because Tioga Road is a seasonally operated portion of the park, a great deal of effort is required at the start of every new season. In the fall, considerable time and effort is required to winterize buildings along the corridor. This work must be completed prior to early storms. Failure to winterize buildings quickly enough can result in damage to buildings, pipes, and other facilities.

In spring once the Tioga Road opens to through traffic, all utility systems associated with water and wastewater treatment need to be inspected--and potentially repaired--after having been under snow for so many months. Additionally, the employee housing (much of which consists of canvas tent cabins) needs to be set up before staff can arrive and begin operating visitor services.

How do I get across the Sierra Nevada when Tioga Road is closed?

Highways 108 and 4, north of Yosemite, are also closed during winter. Highway 88 over Carson Pass remains open, although it can close briefly during and after storms. Highways 50 and 80 remain open all year; tire chains are often required in winter. Highways south of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks are open and also provide access to the eastern Sierra Nevada.

For More Information:

It is not possible to predict when the Tioga Road will open or close—we only know a few days prior to opening, and closures can happen suddenly with storms.



- Yosemite National Park website (specific page regarding Tioga Road): <http://www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/tioga.htm>
- Inyo National Forest website (USFS facilities and services): <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/inyo>
- Road conditions (inside of Yosemite): 209/372-0200
- Road conditions (outside of Yosemite via Caltrans): 800/427-7623
<http://www.dot.ca.gov/cgi-bin/roads.cgi>