



# UIW

College of Agriculture  
and Natural Resources  
**Extension**  
Crook County

## Dirt Road Realities

Life is better down that old dirt road. Country roads, take me home. That is until someone comes driving down the middle of the road around a blind corner at 50 mph, throwing rocks and dust. Gravel roads are romanticized by country music and inspirational quotes on Pinterest, but if you live on a gravel road, you know there can be serious hassles.

Crook County has more than 1000 miles of county roads and zero stop lights. To say this is a rural county seems like an understatement. Not all gravel roads are county roads however. There might be private roads, subdivision maintained roads, unmaintained county roads, and then of course, maintained county roads. These roads are funded and maintained through the Road and Bridge Department under the Crook County Commissioners. There are many policies and laws on county roads you might not be aware of from things such as mail box placement to snow removal.

Mail box placement is regulated on county roads. Considerations on placement include travel, snow removal, and road maintenance. Mail boxes must meet the required set-backs. They should not be placed in the road right-of-way, easement, or dedication that is 66 foot wide without written permission. If placed incorrectly, the owner is liable for any damage caused to county equipment or vehicles of the public. Mailbox designs and placement are approved by application to county road and bridge. Mail boxes are required to have a setback minimum of twelve feet from the shoulder of the road and set on a wood post no bigger than 4 by 4 with holes drilled through at ground level so in case of impact, it will break off, or a steel post with breakaway hinges at ground level.

Daily driving on county roads and living on a dirt road, or just using a county road to access public lands, can all present different challenges. Meeting another car on a blind corner or coming over a hill in the middle of the road can be a heart stopper. A recent article in the Cowboy State Daily newspaper indicated that speed limits on county roads are set by the legislature at 55 mph for unpaved roads. For those unaccustomed to driving on gravel, or on unfamiliar roads, this can be a dangerous speed. There are different conditions on gravel such as loose gravel, no defined road lines, soft shoulders, and dust to name a few. Gravel roads also have a longer stopping distance than a paved road, making it easier to lose control of a vehicle. Gravel road maintenance is determined greatly by weather. The road may get rough for travel, with potholes and washboards (corrugations) before conditions are right for grading. Grading is

taking a long blade on a construction machine to scrape the road bed to create a flat surface. Grading the road will cause a softer surface than normal and more difficult driving conditions.

Another matter of concern on gravel roads can be cattle guards (or car gates). These are the metal tubes manufactured together to replace gates in roadways where fences intersect, allowing cars to drive over, but stopping livestock from crossing. The road often washes out on either side of these devices and can give a real jar to the driver and vehicle. On county roads, cattle guards are regulated by the County Commissioners. Landowners must obtain a permit for the county to install or replace cattle guards on county roads. The road and bridge link on the [crookcounty.gov](http://crookcounty.gov) website has the policy and applications for cattle guards. Road and bridge are responsible for maintenance and cleaning of cattle guards on county roads.

Dust can be another detriment to living on a gravel road. Your car will not stay clean long, and neither will your house if it's close enough to the road. The Road and Bridge department suggests building at least 300 feet from a gravel road to reduce problems. Also, dust is generally more of a problem on north and east sides of the road in Crook County due to the prevailing winds. However, you are not destined to live with a film of dust on your furniture. There are dust control methods available. A county road with average daily count of 200 vehicles or more is eligible for "fugitive dust mitigation" through the county. Magnesium chloride treatments act as a barrier on the road surface by the "hygroscopic properties of the chloride salt absorbing moisture from the air to keep road surfaces damp and form a protective barrier to trap dust particles ([snowicesalt.com](http://snowicesalt.com)). If you don't live on a high traffic road, don't despair. There are companies available to do private application or contact road and bridge for pricing. This treatment is not equivalent to paving. The duration and effectiveness varies based on weather, traffic, and drainage. Additionally, mag water is corrosive to metal parts, plastic, and chrome and can create problems for your vehicle. It is recommended to wash vehicles regularly if driving on mag chloride treated roads.

Dry dusty roads eventually turn into wet and snowy roads. Maintained county roads are provided with snow plowing and sanding. However, with only six plows and drivers, it may take time to get each road sufficiently cleared. Again, the policy for snow removal can be found on the county website. No snow removal will be done until more than four inches of snow has fallen on roads. Removal is done during regular business hours of 7am-5pm Monday-Friday unless otherwise determined by the road and bridge supervisor. Additionally, school bus routes have priority during school days followed by main traveled county roads. The county does not plow school bus routes unless they are county roads. Private roads, subdivision roads, and driveways adjoining county roads are the responsibility of landowners.

Don't get frustrated, irritated, or belligerent about living on a gravel road. Know the perils and hardships before committing to the country lifestyle.