

Work continues at Last Chance Grade

May 14, 2021



A major landslide in February closed down a three mile stretch of Highway 101 between Crescent City and Klamath, known as Last Chance Grade.

Since then, the stretch of road has opened up only to one-lane traffic, and is subjected to daily, two-hour closures occurring Monday-Thursday from 9-11 a.m., 12-2 p.m. and 3-5 p.m., and on Fridays from 9-11 a.m. and 12-2 p.m. The road does not close during weekends, however, motorists should still expect 30-minute delays, due to one-lane traffic.

To better understand daily operations at Last Chance Grade, the Triplicate was given a hardhat tour Tuesday.

George Thorpe III is a construction inspector with Ghirardelli Associates, a construction management company overseeing the cleanup of the landslide. Thorpe III said he hopes the road will be safe enough to open up both lanes in a “couple of months.” He would not provide a more definitive timeline because he said the situation is always changing.

In his longtime career with both CalTrans and Ghirardelli, Thorpe III has spent years working various projects on Last Chance Grade, however, he has never seen a slide equal to the February event.

“The road was closed for three days, it was raining rocks. Literally, rocks were spitting out. I’ve never seen rocks spit out of the hillside,” said Thorpe III.

During the two-hour closures, crews work at shoring up the unstable cliffside, said Thorpe III. A spider excavator — named for its stabilizing legs that allow it to work at steep angles — pushes unsteady rock and dirt down the cliff and onto the road, where it is then loaded into dump trucks by other excavators and hauled away.

According to Thorpe III, 45,000 cubic yards of dirt, rock and trees will be hauled away by the end of the cleanup. The Del Norte County fairgrounds, as well as the Elk Valley Casino is accepting some of the material for projects they are conducting.

When they aren’t pushing rock down the hill, crews use the spider to drill cable anchors into the cliffside. Once the hill is stable, they will hang rockfall netting from those anchors in order to catch future debris and prevent it from falling down to the road.

One of the challenges of the cleanup is most of the heavy equipment, including the spider excavator, has to be flown by helicopter because there are no alternative roads.

Due to the lack of an alternative route, the closures and delays have had a major impact on the regional economy. While the impact of this particular event on Last Chance has not yet been determined, a 2019 CalTrans press release stated, “a catastrophic failure would have a \$1-1.5 billion negative impact on the regional economy.”

With a short-term fix still a few months away, many are wondering about the long-term solution to Last Chance Grade, which has been plagued by slides and closures since the 1980s, according to Thorpe III.

CalTrans is conducting a plethora of geological, wildlife and environmental impact studies to determine possible long-term solutions. They recently announced they had narrowed the field of options down to just two: Alternative F and Alternative X.

The more expensive option, Alternative F, is to build a 1.5-mile tunnel into the hillside, which would eliminate the need for Last Chance Grade. The estimated price tag for Alternative F is \$1-\$2 billion dollars. Beyond the hefty price tag, another challenge to Alternative F is most of the land around the area is tribal owned.

Alternative X’s estimated price tag is \$300 million. In that plan, CalTrans would maintain the current alignment of the road, but re-engineer a one mile stretch to include about 15 new walls on the west side of the slope, which would hold in the earth beneath the road.