

CalTrans adjusts work schedule at Last Chance Grade

July 4, 2021



In an attempt to speed up landslide cleanup efforts at Last Chance Grade, CalTrans is changing the closure schedule.

Beginning July 6, Highway 101 south of Crescent City, will close down Monday-Thursday from 8 a.m. to noon and 3 to 7 p.m. The road will be open Friday-Sunday, and at all other times, but motorists should still expect 30-minute delays due to one-lane traffic, according to a June 24 press release from CalTrans.

Until July 6, the closure schedule will remain the same, with closures occurring three times per day Monday-Thursday from 9-11 a.m., noon-2 p.m. and 3-5 p.m., and on Fridays from 9-11 a.m. and noon-2 p.m. Motorists should expect 30-minute delays at all other times. Additionally, the road will remain open from July 2-5.

Last Chance Grade has been hampered with perpetual closures since a major landslide in February buried a small stretch of road. Sebastian Cohen, project manager at CalTrans, said the new closure schedule, although potentially frustrating, will move up the slide response completion date from November to the end of August.

“This is not out of desire, it’s out of necessity,” said Cohen.

Cohen said the current schedule of three, two-hour closures is inefficient, and amounts to a little more than three hours of work completed per day. Although it might not look like it when driving by the site, Cohen said they have removed about half of the slide debris so far, which would have put them on track to finish this fall, if the current schedule remained.

“Looking at that production rate, we realized we need to get this going sooner; we need to get production up,” said Cohen. “We are getting a ton of complaints, people aren’t happy, people were throwing stuff at the workers as they drove through...We can tell people are getting extremely aggravated.”

As tourist traffic ramps up, Cohen said work is getting more inefficient each day. To increase work and cut down on negative impacts in the community, CalTrans would typically shift the project to a night job, meaning the closures would also occur at night.

However, night work is nearly impossible at Last Chance Grade due to safety risks associated with the steepness of the slope, as well as dangerous weather conditions, such as the fog. Nevertheless, Cohen said workers can safely haul away the debris at night, which will free up more time for other tasks during the day.

Cohen said the schedule change will allow for four additional hours of effective work per day, increasing the dismal three hours up to about seven. Additionally, a more efficient process will allow CalTrans to finish the cleanup project before school starts in fall, and before the rainy season moves in, which would further hamper work.

“We know the impacts to the community; to people’s jobs,” said Cohen. “And there is zero detour. This really explains and justifies why this sucker is a lifeline.”

Blake Inscore, Mayor Pro Tem of Crescent City, said the community is suffering due to the closure, but he believes CalTrans is doing its best to speed things up.

“We want CalTrans to be able to do the job, and do it safely,” said Inscore. “That may not mean it gets done as fast as any of us want, but it sounds [like] CalTrans is working toward an accelerated schedule.”

Besides finding a long-term solution for the road, Inscore said his primary concern is communicating the schedule change to residents and tourists. Right now, CalTrans is partnering with the chamber of commerce to roll out a marketing campaign for the new schedule.

Emergency services, such as police, fire and medical, have also been impacted by the closures.

Larry Depee, commander with the California Highway Patrol, said response times to calls in the southern part of the county, such as Klamath, have increased.

In order to navigate the new schedule and reduce response times, CHP plans to position an officer south of the closure to respond to calls in the Klamath area, as well as increase staffing during the four-hour closures, according to Depee.

Despite the challenges, Depee said CHP has been able to respond to all calls for service in south county in a “reasonable” amount of time. He said he was more concerned about the extended closures creating even longer lines of cars and affecting traffic in Crescent City and Klamath.

Bill Gillespie, fire chief of Crescent City Fire Department, echoed Depee’s concern about backed up traffic.

Gillseppe said he has already seen the north side closure back up traffic to the Crescent City Harbor District, and he predicts the line will only grow with the longer closures.

While Gillespie has had little difficulty getting his volunteer firefighters and emergency vehicles through the closure during an emergency, he said getting them back through after the emergency is over, has proven tough.

Recently, five volunteers in two emergency vehicles were held up by a two-hour delay after they responded to a wildland fire in Klamath Glen and were trying to return to Crescent City.

“When the units were getting released off the fire, now they’re not in an emergency situation, and it doesn’t become a priority for the construction workers to get them back through,” said Gillespie.

With longer closures, Gillespie is calculating if he should send volunteers and equipment to the southern part of the county for emergency calls.

“Now they’re stuck, they can’t go back to their families, they can’t get back to work,” he said. “I have to question, ‘Can I realistically send them south, not knowing when we are able to get them back.’”