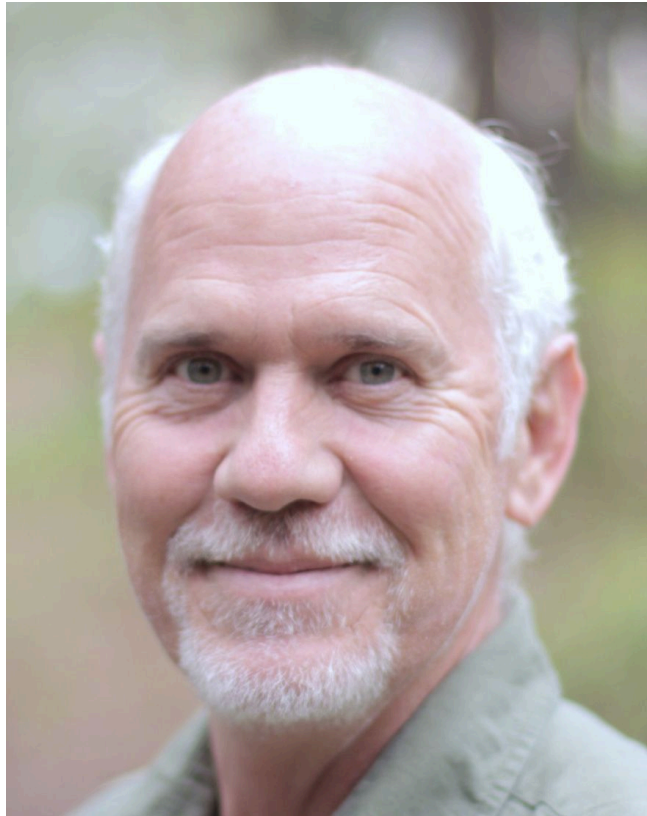

In My View: Last chance to grade Last Chance Grade

January 11, 2024



A few months ago, when Highway 101 South opened up to 2-way traffic again, I remember thinking how great it was that we no longer have to wait to pass through the single lane on Last Chance Grade. It is now smooth passage between Crescent City and Klamath.

People love to complain about Caltrans and road repairs in general, but I want to thank all the Caltrans workers who have worked determinedly to put this road back in working order.

Like the Joni Mitchell song says, “Don’t it always seem to go, you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”

There is an overwhelming amount of information about the efforts to improve and repair Last Chance Grade on the Caltrans website: lastchancegrade.com. I can provide a summary to help you get oriented. The biggest news is that the draft Environmental Documents are complete and available for public review and comment.

Permanent Fix

The Last Chance Grade (LCG) Permanent Restoration Project is a collaborative, multi-year effort to find a permanent solution to geologic instability and roadway failure on a 3-mile segment of US Highway 101 in Del Norte County, extending from Wilson Creek to 9 miles south of Crescent City.

Identifying, planning, and constructing an alternative route at Last Chance Grade is a complex and lengthy process.

Caltrans needs to conduct a variety of studies and analyses to support decision-making throughout the process and secure stakeholder and community agreement along the way.

The stakeholder meetings began in 2015. In the years following, Caltrans has completed a Feasibility Study, a Project Study Report, and preliminary Geotechnical and Environmental Studies to inform their decisions.

Expert risk assessment, values analysis and alternatives analysis helped to reduce the number of alternative routes.

Two Alternatives

Public input and field studies helped Caltrans reduce the number of alternatives to seven.

Given the cost and time needed for study, Caltrans met with its four stakeholder working groups to see if they could reduce the number even further to focus on the best solutions. They looked at impacts, time required to study and build, and how well the alternatives would work.

Caltrans found that five of the alternatives would take much longer to build, have greater potential impacts, and are unlikely to work as well. By not studying these alternatives in greater detail, Caltrans saved \$10 million and shortened the project schedule by one year.

As of May 2021, Caltrans has identified two Last Chance Grade alternatives for further study: Alternative F, a Tunnel Bypass and Alternative X, an End-to-End Re-Engineering of the same route.

Alternative X

Alternative X is quickest to construct, least expensive, and has the second smallest potential impact on the environment and resources.

As such, Caltrans has a responsibility to study it. Though similar to the existing highway alignment, Alternative X is quite different.

Right now, Caltrans is doing emergency repairs in reaction to landslides. Alternative X re-engineers the route to mitigate the landslide hazard.

Caltrans is exploring proven engineering improvements along the entire length of LCG, including: 1) An underground drainage system to reduce excessive stormwater (a major cause of damage); 2) Moving the

current alignment inland at certain locations; and 3) Retaining structures with tiered and steel-reinforced walls, supports and ground anchors both uphill and downhill.

The estimated cost of Alternative X is \$810 million.

Alternative F

Alternative F is a tunnel bypass. The tunnel will be located so it avoids the landslide area; it has the lowest risk of interruption and also the smallest potential environmental impact among the alternatives.

Alternative F has a high construction cost, but it limits impacts on sensitive resources that could require significant mitigation.

Caltrans has successfully constructed and maintained similar tunnels at Devil's Slide in San Mateo County.

The estimated cost of Alternative F is \$1.9 billion

What happens if both Alternatives F and X prove to be unfeasible? Based on initial studies, there's a very low risk of this occurring. If that were to happen, Caltrans would revisit or modify the other alternatives or develop new ones.

Last Chance to Grade

A virtual open house focusing on Last Chance Grade will be held via Zoom from 5:30-7 p.m. Jan. 24, 2024. Access the meeting at www.lastchancegrade.com. Attending this meeting is not required to provide comments on the draft Environmental Documents. The deadline to comment is Feb. 13, 2024.

This is your last chance to grade the Last Chance Grade alternatives.

To provide public comment on the draft Environmental Documents, submit them in writing to: Steve Croteau, North Region Environmental, Department of Transportation, P.O. Box 3700, Eureka, CA 95502-3700 or email DEDcomments@lastchancegrade.com.

What's next?

After receiving public comments on the draft Environmental Documents, a preferred alternative will be selected, and final Environmental Documents will be prepared. Over the next two years additional biological assessments, botanical studies, wetland delineations and final geotechnical studies must be completed.

Guided by this additional information, preliminary designs will be completed for the highway, tunnel (if selected) and related structures. The final design and permitting phase will be from 2025 to 2030. Construction will take 5-8 years from 2030 to 2037 and the alternative route will be open to the public in 2038.

This is a complicated project that will take time to complete, but it will take even longer if anyone sues over design or permitting shortcuts. It appears that all the parties involved are trying to move as fast as possible.

I commend Congressman Huffman, State Senator McGuire and Assemblymember Wood for diligently guiding this very transparent process. We will need the continued support of our elected representatives to help line up the funding to complete this vital project.

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