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'Long-term solution' draft released for Last Chance Grade



The Last Chance Grade section of Highway 101 about 10 miles south of Crescent City has experienced over 200 landslides due to its unstable coastal geography. A new plan aims to improve it. – Photo courtesy of Tamera Leighton

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LATEST HEADLINES

'Long-term solution' draft released for Last Chance Grade



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A draft report for the future of Last Chance Grade, a volatile section of highway 101 and a major thoroughway to the North Coast, was released Friday by Caltrans. The project aims to permanently restore the section that is frequently subject to landslides in Del Norte County.

Three alternatives have been proposed by Caltrans in an [environmental impact document released Friday](#): a no build alternative, reengineering and realigning a section of the highway, or a 1.1 mile tunnel to be built east of the existing highway.

"It's a momentous project and it's a big deal. Our district rarely sees a project of this magnitude," especially the tunnel alternative, said Myles Cochran, a spokesperson for Caltrans District one. Outreach to other agencies started in 2014, though Caltrans has proposed alternatives in the years past that didn't come to fruition.

One alternative involves reengineering and realigning a 1.6-mile-long section of the existing highway; adding retaining walls, an underground drainage system and eastward retreats from the roadway. Another alternative would mean constructing a 6,000-foot tunnel east of the existing highway, in order to avoid the worst areas in terms of landslides. This involves building a tunnel with portals, a bridge at the northern portal to connect the tunnel alignment to the existing highway and a center for tunnel support.

According to the report, old-growth and other mature trees would need to be removed for both build alternatives. The tunnel proposal would remove more of the largest trees than the realigning proposal. It notes both build alternatives would result in significant and unavoidable impacts related to late successional forest and marbled murrelet and its designated critical habitat.

Included in the public comments of the draft include an email from Dec. 2021 from Tina Bartlett, regional manager from the Northern Region of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Bartlett notes the project may result in potentially significant impacts to old-growth forest habitat and also noted wildlife connectivity could be impacted for a number of species. She said CDFW is particularly concerned about potential impacts to northern red-legged frog as a result of the project as a substantial northern red-legged frog breeding population is in a pond a quarter mile away from the project area.

Caltrans noted the importance of addressing the frequent road closures and one-way traffic in the section due to landslides; the section is "the only viable route between Klamath and Crescent City," the report said. The report notes that the project is needed to address economic outfall of a long term closure, delays and detours, increasing maintenance and project costs and the frequency of large storm events due to climate change.

The website for the project estimates since 1997, landslide repair projects have cost over \$100 million. In October, Last Chance Grade opened in both directions for the first time in about nine years.