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TOM WHEELER (/AUTHOR/TOM-WHEELER/) / FRIDAY, APRIL 30 (/2021/APR/30/) @ 2:25 P.M. / GUEST OPINION (/CATEGORIES/OP-ED/)

GUEST OPINION: As Someone Who Has Two Active Lawsuits Against Caltrans, Let Me Say That Caltrans is Doing a Great Job With Last Chance Grade



Last Chance Grade, an oft-closed and perilous section of Highway 101 just south of Crescent City. Photo: Caltrans.

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PREVIOUSLY:

- Permanent Fix for Last Chance Grade Narrowed Down to Two Options
(<https://wildrivers.lostcoastoutpost.com/2021/apr/23/permanent-fix-last-chance-grade-narrowed-down-two/>)

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As the executive director of EPIC and someone who is currently suing Caltrans — *twice* — for projects on Highway 197/199 and at Richardson Grove, I can't believe I am writing this, but: Caltrans is doing an impressive job with the Last Chance Grade Project. Recently, Caltrans announced it had narrowed its range of alternatives to just two options for the Last Chance Grade Project. Take it from someone who has been watching this project develop for over five years: This is a big deal. While EPIC normally would be upset that an agency has limited the scope of study to just two alternatives so early in the process, for the Last Chance Grade Project, we will make an exception. The reason is that these two alternatives are the direct result of consistent, good-faith community engagement. By talking to the community early about its concerns with the project, Caltrans has knocked years off the timeline, slashed the bill by millions of dollars, *and* has likely threaded a narrow needle to produce a project that all sides can live with.

First, it is important to understand the herculean task of trying to fix Last Chance Grade. The road hugs tightly the steep and highly erodible coast, which gets pummeled with winter rains causing landslides ranging from the sudden and scary to the slow sloughing of the hill into the ocean. Today, the road is so fickle that it demands almost constant construction. And the surrounding landscape makes permanently fixing the problem complicated. To the West is the Pacific Ocean, to the east are equally steep and erodible hills that are also home to endangered species, salmon runs, and old-growth redwoods.

Alternatives analysis is at the heart of environmental impact review, where an agency investigates all of the potentially feasible ways to achieve the same goal of a proposed project. In doing so, an agency might discover that there are alternative ways to achieve the same end goal that would result in fewer environmental impacts. Applied to Last Chance Grade, Caltrans is obligated to consider feasible alternatives that would accomplish the same goal of providing a safe and reliable road.

After decades of patching together a road with what might feel like bailing wire and duct tape, Caltrans began planning to replace the road. Given the complexity presented by trying to build a road through some of the most landslide-prone lands of California and given the likely tension of a major road replacement through a state park (with the potential cutting of old-growth redwoods), Caltrans deliberately and methodically studied alternatives *before* starting environmental impact review. What's more, instead of the usual "black box" of government, where decisions are made in some government office using some process that is obtuse and opaque to the public, Caltrans sorted through these initial alternatives with the public.

Through this deliberate environmental review process, Caltrans was able to consider and study a wide range of alternatives, some of which likely never left the desk of the engineer who dreamed it up and others brought forward for consideration by the public. Through study and data collection (and a lot of engagement with the public), the wastebasket of rejected alternatives became larger and larger — A1, A2, B1, B2, C3, C4, C5, D3, D4, D5, E3, E4, E5, and L — until two alternatives remained: X and F. These two left standing were the product of years of study, and based on their review by Caltrans and the public, are hands-down the "best" alternatives to provide a reliable and safe road that also avoids significant environmental and cultural impacts.

Alternative X would be a full rebuild of 1.1 miles of highway, but unlike the other alternatives, this alternative would maintain the current alignment as much as possible. Caltrans strongly suspects that current sliding is largely a result of too much water in the soil, which promotes landsliding. X would rebuild the road, including digging back and armoring the slope in areas, as well as dewatering the route through wells and pumps to promote greater soil stability. Dewatering as a form of slope stabilization has been successfully pursued in other areas of California. Because this alternative would more-or-less stay in its current alignment, the ground disturbance impacts from the project are the least significant, with 10 acres of coastal shrub likely affected. The pricetag is also among the least expensive, at \$300 million, and a relatively quick construction timeline at 3.5 years to complete. The downside? While dewatering would significantly reduce the threat of landsliding, it would not remove it completely. There is also a perception problem. Because the road would be rebuilt at, more or less, its current location, many in the community might question whether this is truly a fix to the site-specific issues encountered before.

Alternative F is the "big tunnel" alternative: two bored tunnels, set next to each other with one-way traffic through each, dug east of the active landslide and capable of withstanding large earthquakes — a feat of engineering that Caltrans believes is achievable. As a tunnel, it would avoid most above-ground environmental impacts except for the tunnel mouth openings, which would result in some loss of mature or old-growth trees. Caltrans has worked hard, however, to reduce that impact and each iteration seems to save more trees. The downside? Cost. A large tunnel through Last Chance Grade won't come cheap, likely topping one billion dollars. But given the importance of the road and the significant effort to build support for the project, we believe that this amount is doable.

By narrowing down alternatives to these two, we have avoided additional months if not years of resource-intensive study by Caltrans of some of the "lesser" routes. (If you want to get any idea of the cost of environmental analysis, in many areas that have now been released from further consideration, Caltrans would have needed to ferry in drilling equipment into old-growth forests by helicopter—a cost, both to the state and to the environment, that can now be avoided.) And the two alternatives brought forward are the least environmentally impactful of all that had been studied, which both maintains our world-famous redwoods for future generations to enjoy and avoids risk of project-delaying litigation. In sum, Caltrans' progress on Last Chance Grade is a big #\$\$^@ deal.

In giving thanks for a job well done, there are a couple important people to mention. First, to my surprise and delight, Caltrans has done a very good job on Last Chance Grade. At Caltrans, Jaime Matteoli, Steve Croteau, Sebastian Cohen, Charlie Narwold, Talitha Hodgson, Matt Smith and Matt Brady have gone above and beyond to reach this stage. Congressman Jared Huffman also needs significant credit. In 2015, Congressman Huffman convened a stakeholder group to try and work through the likely issues that would arise as the project developed — a deliberate attempt to avoid another fiasco like Richardson Grove. Joy Keller-Weidman from the John S. McCain III National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution at the Udall Foundation has been the glue that has held the stakeholder group together.

I am going out of my way to praise the stakeholder engagement process and its fruits because this sort of process — sometimes long and frustrating, sometimes tedious and boring, always above what is legally required — should be a model for the government in pursuing other potentially contentious projects. Process matters. Robust stakeholder engagement both results in a both better end product — I like to think that the different expertise and perspectives brought by stakeholders has informed the project's design for the better—and less friction in the community. When stakeholders can see the competing demands and various interests that have to be managed, we can become more forgiving of the compromises that have to be made. If other contentious projects, like the Richardson Grove Project that has been mired in litigation for over a decade, were put forward through a similar process, I am positive that we would have seen a different project emerge and a different public response.

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