

U.S. & WORLD // CALIFORNIA

This California city relies on a highway that's sliding into the ocean. Fixing it will cost \$2 billion

By Rachel Swan, Reporter

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A rendering of the proposed tunnel project on Last Chance Pass, a portion of Highway 101 along the California coastline that connects Eureka to Crescent City. Courtesy of Caltrans

One of California's most expensive infrastructure projects is inching forward in a tiny city on the north coast, where landslides have long battered the main highway.

The road in question is Last Chance Grade, a cliff-hugging stretch of U.S. 101 that links Eureka to Crescent City. Winding three miles through a redwood forest that overlooks the Pacific Ocean, the thoroughfare is beautiful and cursed. Ground tremors and winter storms send rocks tumbling from adjacent slopes, burying large sections of pavement and forcing closures. Parts of the overhang are steadily crumbling into the sea.

After years of patch jobs and careful monitoring, Caltrans landed on a solution: A 6,000-foot tunnel that would bypass the landslide area, at a cost of \$2.1 billion. If built, it would be the longest tunnel in state history, a bedrock lifeline for a relatively isolated place. Political leaders still aren't sure where they'll find all that money. But they see no other option.

"We're really racing against time," said Democratic Congressman Jared Huffman, who represents a coastal span from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Oregon border. He considers Last Chance Grade the district's highest transportation priority — more urgent, even, than flood-endangered Highway 37 in the North Bay.

"Last Chance Grade is on the verge of falling into the ocean on any given day," Huffman said, emphasizing the road's fragility, and its importance. It's an interstate artery that links Del Norte County not only to neighboring Humboldt, but to the rest of the outside world. About 6,000 vehicles travel the route daily, ranging from commuters to truckers to day-trippers. Big rigs rumble along the unsteady terrain, shipping goods from the Bay Area or Humboldt to Crescent City. The most perilous section forms a continental edge, bordered by state and national parks and the ancestral territories of multiple indigenous tribes.

Caltrans has maintained the grade for years with a string of "multimillion dollar band-aid" fixes that require squeezing the highway to one lane, Huffman noted. Neither the congressman nor the state's transportation agency think the rinse-and-repeat cycle of road repair is sustainable. And an indefinite shutdown of Last Chance Grade would paralyze the region.

"Our milk is hauled on that road every day," said Kate Walker, an employee of Rumiano Cheese company in Crescent City, which relies on milk from 19 organic dairies, 16 of them south in Humboldt County. When the grade closes, the dairy trucks have a much longer journey, through Willow Creek and up Interstate 5 to Grants Pass. That trip can take "hours and hours," Walker said.

Mulling the geological predicament of Last Chance Grade, Caltrans engineers have proposed many solutions, including bridges, culverts, smaller tunnels and different realignments of the road. Last year, the agency settled on a plan for the mile-long tunnel, which evidently had the most buy-in from lawmakers, local tribes, environmentalists and every other stakeholder. Building consensus was only the first step; the project is now undergoing environmental reviews as lawmakers try to rally funding. So far, Caltrans has set aside \$275 million for design and engineering, with construction scheduled to begin in 2030.

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Huffman rejects the toll idea, citing the rural poverty in Humboldt and Del Norte counties. Instead, he's gambling on a [federal mega grant program](#) for "inherently huge and expensive" transportation infrastructure. He and others acknowledge the challenges ahead. Costs only escalate over time, and their tunnel plan must pass through multiple presidential administrations.

Short, the county supervisor, is relentlessly optimistic about the future of Last Chance. Raised in Crescent City, he's driven along the grade "regularly" for years, and has more than one unsettling story. Decades ago, he said, his grandparents had to gingerly maneuver around a piece of road that had "fallen away" from the three mile stretch. Had they been less attentive, he surmised, they might have fallen to the surf below.

"We're going to be groundbreaking (on Last Chance) by the end of this decade, and I think we can all feel it," Short said, referring to the anxiety and long-shot faith among Crescent City's 6,000 residents. "We're just hoping the state and the federal government can come together."

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