



Project Name: Last Chance Grade Permanent Restoration

DIST-CO-RTE-PM: 01-DN-101-PM 12.7 to 16.5

EA: 01-0F280

EFIS ID: 0115000099

**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
STATEMENT OF OVERRIDING CONSIDERATIONS**

FOR

**LAST CHANCE GRADE PERMANENT RESTORATION PROJECT THAT WOULD
DEVELOP A LONG-TERM SOLUTION TO THE INSTABILITY AND POTENTIAL
ROADWAY FAILURE ON U.S. 101 BETWEEN POST MILES 12.7 AND 16.5 IN DEL
NORTE COUNTY**

The following information is presented to comply with State CEQA Guidelines (Title 14 California Code of Regulations, Division 6, Chapter 3, Section 15093), and the Department of Transportation and California Transportation Commission Environmental Regulations (Title 21 California Code of Regulations, Division 2, Chapter 11, Section 1501 et seq.). Reference is made to the Final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the project, which is the basic source for the information.

The following impacts have been identified as significant and not fully mitigable:

- *Sensitive Natural Communities and Large Trees:* Alternative F would result in permanent impacts and habitat conversion on 1.09 acres of late successional redwood forest (including large mature redwoods). Alternative X would affect 0.89 acre and Alternative F would affect 1.13 acres of late successional Sitka spruce forest and includes the removal of large mature trees. The late successional-forest habitat impacts would occur within Redwood National and State Parks (RNSP) lands designated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. Late successional redwood forest and Sitka spruce forest are considered Sensitive Natural Communities (SNC) by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). Under CEQA, a significant impact could occur if a project would have a substantial adverse effect on any riparian habitat or other sensitive natural community identified in local or regional plans, policies, regulations, or by CDFW or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Given that late successional redwood forest is rare, and Alternative F would remove large trees from quality habitat, Alternative F would have a substantial adverse effect on an SNC identified by CDFW. Similarly, given the magnitude of the impact and rarity of late successional Sitka spruce forest, Alternatives X and F would have a substantial adverse effect on late successional Sitka spruce forest, also



considered an SNC by CDFW. To mitigate for the loss of late successional redwood and Sitka spruce forest habitat, Mitigation measure Bio-1, as described in the Final EIR, would fund forest restoration projects that accelerate the development of late successional characteristics in younger-aged stands and preserve forested lands to further habitat continuity for late successional forests and/or publicly managed lands and special status species.

Mitigation funds for restoration would be directed to Redwoods Rising, a landscape-scale restoration project managed by RNSP. Restoration would be implemented at a scale sufficient to influence watershed processes, habitat connectivity, and long-term regional ecosystem resilience. Because the ecological consequences of the project are immediate while recovery of late successional forest characteristics occurs over generations, mitigation would be implemented through a long-term restoration and adaptive management framework. The establishment of dedicated restoration funding through an endowment is necessary to support the long-term mitigation commitment. The funding would be designed to finance restoration activities including ongoing maintenance, adaptive management, and research. Ecological outcomes are best achieved through sustained, landscape-scale implementation informed by restoration science, monitoring, and adaptive management.

Preservation would be accomplished through the purchase of existing redwood and Sitka spruce forest habitat in Del Norte and/or Humboldt Counties that is threatened by logging or development, with the intent of conveying the preserved habitat to an agency or organization that would manage it in perpetuity. Forest habitat within the coastal zone and adjacent to late successional forests and/or publicly managed lands would be prioritized for preservation. Preservation of forest habitat adjacent to late successional forests and/or publicly managed lands would provide buffer habitat, reducing edge effects such as encroachment of invasive species, wildfire, and other external disturbances. This preservation would be coordinated to provide the greatest benefit to existing late successional forests, and/or publicly managed lands, and special status species. Caltrans would develop a Long-term Management Plan identifying specific goals, objectives, and associated tasks based on the specific needs of the preserved forested habitat.

However, acquiring land with forest habitat suitable for preservation presents several challenges including, but not limited to, availability of land for purchase, willingness of property owners to sell at fair market value, issues arising during the due diligence process, and identification of an entity qualified and willing to hold the property and/or conservation easement(s) and conduct long-term management. If determined infeasible, Caltrans would fund additional restoration to account for the inability to effectively implement preservation.

Restoration efforts to put early successional redwood and Sitka spruce forests on an accelerated timeline to develop late successional characteristics and preservation of existing forested lands to further habitat continuity for late



successional forests cannot fully address the loss of late successional forest habitat affected by the project. Therefore, impacts from the removal of late successional forest habitat would remain significant, as the identified mitigation measures may take centuries to achieve full functional equivalency and result in replacement of lost habitat.

- *Marbled murrelet (MAMU) and its critical habitat*: Both Alternatives X and F would permanently remove MAMU critical habitat through construction of highway infrastructure and habitat conversion (tree removal to facilitate cut and fill needed for construction). MAMU is a federally threatened and state endangered species. Under CEQA, a significant impact could occur if a project would have a substantial adverse effect, either directly or through habitat modifications, on any species identified as a candidate, sensitive, or special status species in local or regional plans, policies, or regulations, or by CDFW, USFWS, or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries. Because of the restrictive habitat requirements of MAMU and the rarity of its habitat, even with standard measures incorporated, habitat removal associated with both alternatives would have a substantial adverse effect on this special status species identified by CDFW and USFWS. Mitigation measure Bio-1, as described above and in the Final EIR, would fund restoration and preservation projects to mitigate for the loss of late successional redwood, Douglas-fir, and Sitka spruce conifer forest. However, impacts from the removal of late successional forest habitat and the associated impacts on MAMU and its critical habitat would remain significant, as the identified mitigation measures may take centuries to result in replacement of lost habitat.

Overriding considerations that support approval of this recommended project are as follows:

The purpose of the project is to develop a long-term solution to the instability and potential roadway failure at Last Chance Grade (LCG) that would provide a more reliable connection, reduce maintenance costs, and protect the economy, natural resources, and cultural landscapes.

A long-term sustainable solution at LCG is needed to address:

- Economic ramifications of a long-term failure and closure
- Risk of delay/detour to the traveling public
- Increasing maintenance and emergency project costs
- Increases in the frequency and severity of large storm events caused by climate change

During project development, a wide range of possible alternatives were identified over a three-decade period, based on past studies and comments received from stakeholders, including regulatory agencies and the community. Several potential alternatives were



considered but eliminated from further consideration prior to preparation and public circulation of the Draft Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS) due to anticipated environmental impacts, cost, feasibility, and/or failure to meet most of the basic project objectives.

Two build alternatives, as well as a no-build alternative, were evaluated in the Draft EIR/EIS. The build alternatives included the following:

- Alternative X would involve reengineering a 1.6-mile-long portion of the existing roadway. This alternative would include a series of retaining walls, underground drainage features, and strategic eastward retreats (realignments) to minimize the risk of landslides.
- Alternative F would involve constructing an approximately 6,000-foot-long (1.1-mile) tunnel to the east of the existing highway to avoid the most intense area of known landslides and geologic instability, thereby avoiding the portion of U.S. 101 most prone to closure. The main components of this alternative include the construction of tunnel portals and the tunnel, a bridge, and an Operations and Maintenance Center (OMC).

Both Alternatives X and F involve geotechnical investigations to confirm the location of basal failure planes and landslide depths.

After circulation of the Draft EIR/EIS, the Project Development Team identified the preferred alternative based on a variety of factors, including information identified in the 2024 Geotechnical Risk Assessment (GRA), comments received during the public review period of the Draft EIR/EIS, project purpose and need, and input from stakeholders.

Alternative F has been selected as the preferred alternative because it best meets the purpose and need of the project to develop a long-term solution to the hill slope instability and risk of road closure at LCG. Alternative F proposes a long-term solution that avoids the most intense area of landslides and geologic instability, thereby avoiding the portion of U.S. 101 most prone to closure. Alternative F is also expected to provide greater long-term economic and social benefits to the region than Alternative X. While both Alternative X and Alternative F would improve the reliability of the highway, the 2024 GRA concluded that good performance from Alternative F is approximately two times more likely than from Alternative X. More specifically, the probability of increased maintenance activities, repair projects, and traffic impacts (lane closures and full closures) resulting from geotechnical threats related to deep landslides, nested landslides, rockslides, rockfall, and gully erosion is expected to be approximately two times lower for Alternative F than for Alternative X. Alternative F is also expected to be more resilient to extreme storm events and to perform better during a large-magnitude earthquake than Alternative X.

California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 15093(a) states: “If the specific economic, legal, social, technological, or other benefits of a proposed project outweigh



the unavoidable adverse environmental effects, the adverse environmental effects may be considered ‘acceptable.’”

Overall, the proposed project would:

- Address the instability and potential roadway failure of the existing highway at LCG;
- Provide a more reliable connection between Klamath and Crescent City;
- Reduce the risk of economic ramifications associated with potential roadway failures;
- Reduce maintenance activities, repair projects, and traffic impacts from closures; and
- Provide higher resilience to climate change and natural disasters.

For these reasons, and the substantial evidence included in the administrative record as a whole, Caltrans finds that the benefits of the proposed project outweigh the project’s adverse, significant impacts on late successional redwood forest, late successional Sitka spruce forest, and marbled murrelet and its critical habitat.

Kathie Vizgaudis on behalf of Matthew Brady

District Director (or designee)

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Kathie Vizgaudis', written over a horizontal line.

Signature

July 10, 2026

Date