

Community Comment – April 25th, 2016

By Jon Sapper

Last Chance Grade

A couple of weeks ago, Sam Pennisi commented on the precipitous nature of Highway 101 just south of Crescent City. That section of road is called Last Chance Grade. I'm not exactly sure how it got its name, but it may actually be prophetic. I drove it the other day and this road is slipping away, even after they quote "fixed" it last year. Hearing a little more about this in the community I decided to do a little snooping to understand it better. For the record, I'm not a geologic engineer and don't know how to build a road. But, I can tell when I drive on a road that has slumped off and my car is bouncing around.

A California Geologic Survey conducted in 2000 mapped over 200 active landslides in this area and concluded there has been..... loss of embankment fill below the grade. I guess that terminology is better than saying....the road is getting ready to slide into the ocean. The conclusions of thirty years of many studies confirm..... it's still sliding folks. Now, I'm going to assume that at some point there will be a study that says, we don't need any more studies, we know the road is slipping away and can fall into the ocean at any time. If that happens, the study says this will be considered a complete failure. Now, the only complete failure will be if we wait till it does fall into the ocean to do something about it. Yes, it will be expensive to build a bypass around the slide. But what would the cost be to Del Norte and Humboldt Counties, if the only connection for 5 years, (the time it would take to build a bypass), is an 8 hour drive to Redding, up to Oregon and back to Crescent City? Nothing short of an economic catastrophe!

I have heard some compare this to the Confusion Hill slide and bypass. One big difference is the slide at Confusion Hill was ABOVE the road and could be cleared FROM the road when needed. The highway at Last Chance Grade is IN the slide, a bit of a difference. In the meantime, recent studies indicated the need for a soil nail wall, a soldier pile ground anchor, 40 foot high retaining walls, etc. etc. This is like putting sandbags in front of your doorway when a tsunami is approaching. It may give temporary intellectual comfort to the fact you're about to be swept away.

As I mentioned earlier, the name might actually be quite apropos. It MIGHT be our last chance to build a bypass before an earthquake or more rain triggers the quote "complete failure". If and when that happens, I don't want to be driving where there is....loss of embankment fill below grade. My truck doesn't like salt water and doesn't float. Build the bypass and build it soon.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.