

# Study finds \$50 million grading project would make La Conchita safe

**Kathleen Wilson, Ventura County Star, 8-16-10**

Five years after a landslide killed 10 people in La Conchita, a new study concludes that most of the population could live there relatively safely once a \$50 million grading project is done.

Commissioned at the direction of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger a year after the 2005 disaster, the study evaluated five alternatives: doing nothing, moving people out of the area and a trio of options for grading the area to reduce the risk.

The team of geotechnical, geological and risk assessment consultants said doing nothing would almost certainly result in deaths and at least \$190 million in property and human losses.

Nor did the team recommend moving residents or doing extensive grading of the cliff and community beneath it.

Instead the consultants opted for the least invasive grading project, one that involves limited grading of the cliff above the beach community north of Ventura.

That would provide a tolerable level of risk at a relatively low cost, the consultants said.

That is likely “to be the most favorable project outcome,” the study said. “We caution that it is just an opinion; however, one that is based upon a broad understanding of geology, engineering and risks developed over the course of our study.”

The scenario recommended in the study reduces the slope in the areas that failed in 1995 and 2005, but not the site of an ancient landslide, county geologist Jim O’Tousa said. He said a more expansive grading project at a cost of \$200 million would extend across the entire width of La Conchita.

Mike Bell, who heads a community group for the town of 330, said residents are forming committees to figure out how to pay for the recommended project.

“We’re glad the result of study is the hillside can be stabilized and there is a potential for the history of the town,” Bell said Monday.

He said possible options for raising the \$50 million include grants and assessments on property owners.

It’s unlikely the state could contribute, but federal aid may materialize, said state Assemblyman Pedro Nava, who represents La Conchita in the Legislature.

Bell also plans to approach the county Board of Supervisors in September to ask it to remove a sign saying the area is in a geological hazard zone as well as individual signs on homes.

The study shows that perhaps only 30 of 161 homes are in a hazardous area, he said.

Nava said the study gives the community a science-based analysis of different scenarios for addressing the

problem. “That’s probably the most important contribution,” he said. “It’s not an opinion by anybody who’s directly involved.”

State officials agreed with the findings Monday.

“The study speaks for itself,” said Kelly Huston, assistant secretary of the California Emergency Management Agency, which established a group of private and public interests to address the problem.

“The next step is the community coming together and deciding how it could be mitigated and what it may cost. We’re going to help them with that process.”

County Supervisor Steve Bennett, who represents La Conchita, said it’s too soon to comment on the study’s findings. He wants to consult with county staff as well as legal counsel, noting that the county faced a major wrongful death lawsuit over the landslide. The county was ultimately dismissed from the suit.

“There are a lot of things that have to be looked into carefully because of all the potential liabilities out there,” he said.

The study’s findings contrast with recommendations from UC Santa Barbara scientists several months after the disaster. Fearing more deaths, they said the community should be turned into a beach park.

This study was conducted by the Berkeley geotechnical engineering firm of Alan Kropp & Associates Inc.; the geology firm of William Lettis & Associates; and Laurie Johnson Consulting, a risk assessment company.

Bell said residents wrote to Schwarzenegger and his wife, Maria Shriver, after the disaster to ask them to help find a solution. Schwarzenegger pledged to help make the community safe when he visited La Conchita after a wall of mud and debris fell on Jan. 10, 2005.