

# La Conchita grading project may be too risky

*Officials want to help, but don't want to make taxpayers liable*

**Shane Cohn, Ventura County Reporter, 8-26-10**

It would take \$50 million for La Conchita residents to live without fear when the rain falls, according to a new study.

After the 2005 landslide that killed 10 people and devastated 36 houses, the La Conchita Hillside Hazard Mitigation Group formed. At the direction of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the group worked with the California Emergency Management Agency to complete a comprehensive study analysis on mitigating the dangerous hillside above La Conchita.

The results of the study found that the hillside can be stabilized in a number of ways, but the most cost-effective plan recommended by consultants involves a \$50 million limited grading process on the slope hazard above the beachside hamlet.

“The area that has failed will continue to fail unless something is done to stabilize it,” said Mike Bell, resident representing the La Conchita community.

The study, based on geology, engineering and risk, identified four other alternatives, which included two additional high-cost grading possibilities covering a greater area, a do-nothing option, and the option of moving the residents.

If nothing at all is done to the hillside, the study estimated \$190 million in property damages and human losses.

Simply removing the residents does not lessen the geologic and economic impact. The study shows that the canyon north of La Conchita, where mud rushed down, closing the highway and railroad in 2005, is still a risk to spill onto the highway and railroad unless there is mitigation.

“We’ve dug up the facts, done the report and [are] ready to get into the next step with the community,” said Kelly Houston, spokesman for Cal EMA. “This next part is the community putting together a group to decide what is for the best interest of the community. There could be some other option we’re not aware of that this group could uncover.”

Though Bell said the community will look into possibilities for acquiring \$50 million for the grading project, he suggested it may be a good investment for the county.

“We have 20 to 25 lots covered by mud that can’t be built on until it’s stabilized,” said Bell. “That is potentially 20 new homes with property tax revenue for the county. There are 15 to 20 houses in what they say is a geographical hazard. So, if stabilized, there is another 20 lots with revenue potential.”

But taxpayers have long been opposed to their money going toward the La Conchita community because the community has been repeatedly warned about the unstable hillside.

Additionally, the La Conchita hillside is private property and taxpayers want to be left out of the equation,

especially after La Conchita community filed a \$200 million lawsuit against the county in the aftermath of the 2005 mudslide, said County Supervisor Steve Bennett, who represents La Conchita.

“I want to help as much as I can without exposing the taxpayers to new liability,” said Bennett.

Bennett said county professionals are going through the recent study and will then meet a team of lawyers on how to approach the situation.

“It’s going to be a number of weeks before we have any information,” confirmed Bennett.