

Caltrans 'cautiously optimistic' U.S. Highway 101 will open to one-way traffic Sunday

Others not sharing optimism

Thadeus Greenson and Donna Tam, Eureka Times-Standard, 4-1-11

A Caltrans contractor worked through the night Wednesday and all day Thursday to stabilize and assess the massive slide that brought tons of mud, rocks and debris crashing down on U.S. Highway 101 Wednesday morning, closing the road in both directions about five miles north of Garberville.

Caltrans spokeswoman Ann Jones said the agency will be issuing an update this morning but said she was still "cautiously optimistic" late Thursday afternoon that the highway will be reopened to one-way controlled traffic by Sunday.

"Things are going very well, and we're on track," she said.

While JF Shea Co. out of Redding, which was awarded Caltrans' emergency contract, works to clear the slide, county officials continued to assess damage from recent winter storms, some of which they say has been compounded by increased traffic from motorists seeking routes to bypass the slide that has closed the main artery delivering goods and people into and out of the county.

Not everyone is buying into Caltrans' timetable for getting the road reopened.

"There is some optimism that we could have a lane carved through there by Monday," said California Highway Patrol Sgt. Martin Abshire. "We are not planning on that, but it is a possibility. That's not a probability, it's only a possibility, and it's very optimistic."

JF Shea Co Vice President Ed Kernaghan said his company received a call from Caltrans at about 2:30 p.m. Wednesday -- about five hours after the highly saturated hillside above U.S. Highway 101 at Dean Creek gave way -- and had a crew on site working by 4 p.m. that day. Kernaghan said one of the first tasks his crew carried out was plowing an emergency path over the slide, which will allow crews to work on the slide from above and, in emergencies, would give patrol cars and ambulances a path over the slide.

"We mobilized right away, and we worked all night," he said.

Jones said there is still "movement activity" on the slide, which doesn't prevent crews from working on it, but forces them to do so very cautiously.

CHP Sgt. Greg Baarts said crews are taking extra precautions to ensure their safety.

"There are people monitoring the slide while others are working on it," he said. "It's a fluid situation, and it's a dangerous situation for the people working on it."

Baarts said there are about 20 people on site working "very, very hard" on the slide but said he couldn't offer a timetable at this point for getting the road reopened.

”It's all up in the air right now, and it just depends on what that thing does when they start moving large amounts of dirt,” he said.

As of early Thursday afternoon, Kernaghan said, his crews were still doing investigative and exploratory work on the slide, trying to determine its scope and exactly how to go about clearing it.

”It's still too early to tell what all is there,” he said.

One of the questions that remains is what to do with all the dirt from the slide area. Kernaghan said crews are currently dumping the dirt in a local area, but they will have to move it to another location. How far that dumping location is from the slide area could impact how long it takes to get the road clear.

In the meantime, county officials are saying the slide is increasing costs for Humboldt County as crews scramble to ensure the traffic detoured from the highway is not channeled onto backroads that have been heavily damaged by recent winter storms.

The cost for the county to station contracted 24-hour traffic controllers at the roads plus the cost from damage the roads have already sustained from motorists using them as alternative routes is estimated to be more than \$588,000, according to the Humboldt County Public Works Department.

The county suffered estimated damage totaling more than \$10.7 million in the recent spate of winter storms, which caused the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors to declare a local emergency on Wednesday.

Humboldt County Public Works Director Tom Mattson said estimates are very preliminary and may actually go down after further inspections. He emphasized that motorists should stay off county roads when looking for alternatives to U.S. Highway 101.

Caltrans has recommended motorists use Interstate 5 and State Routes 299 and 20 to bypass the slide. Abshire also echoed those recommendations, saying county roads that could be used to bypass the slide area are “in pretty bad shape.” Mattson said the roads are laden with potholes, blind turns, one-lane sections and slides.

Humboldt County Supervisor Clif Clendenen said the community should continue to record any damage or expenses accrued as a result of the slide. Clendenen took an aerial tour of the afflicted areas in Southern Humboldt on Thursday and said he saw massive slides on private lands, with the largest slide near Benbow reaching about a quarter-mile across, completely covering a small road.

”It's doubtful, frankly, we'll be able to leverage any funds,” he said. “But with our emergency declaration (Wednesday) and trying to document every bit of damage, we'll get as far as we can in terms of possible state and federal reimbursement.”

It seems various groups and municipalities are hearing of slide concerns from residents.

Chuck Schager of Eel River Disposal said he has gotten a number of concerned calls. The disposal company is located in Fortuna and handles transfers and recycles in Redway and curbside in Shelter Cove. Schager said everything is operating as normal.

The slide has prompted the city of Arcata to arrange temporary bus service to redirect passengers whose travel plans are affected by the road closure.

The CHP said crews are working diligently on the slide but said the first priority is going to be safety -- both for work crews and motorists. Abshire said everyone is looking to get the road open as soon as possible.

"The contractor did work through the night, and I don't see them taking a break until this thing is finished," Abshire said.