

Slide may take month to clear

Kathe Tanner, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 4-21-11

It's been more than a month since people could drive from Cambria to Carmel on Highway 1 and, Caltrans estimates, it will be "at least a month" before the roadway can fully reopen.

Slides out from underneath and down on top of the highway have kept motorists from making their way through the National Scenic Byway.

Now, the road closure threatens the sixth annual Amgen Tour of California, due to go through Big Sur on May 19.

The highway closed just north of the landmark Bixby Creek Bridge on March 16 when 60 feet of the southbound lane slipped down toward the sea. That closure was partially lifted Saturday night, April 16, and it is expected to be open around the clock today, April 21.

Now, the Big Sur cul-de-sac has flipped ends, with a massive landslide south of Gorda on April 14 expected to take weeks to clear.

Bike race route blocked

The Amgen route calls for racers to leave Seaside near Monterey and pedal down Highway 1 through Big Sur and Cambria and on to the leg's finish line in Paso Robles. A CHP source said race sponsors are considering changes to the route but has no confirmation what those changes might be.

There are alternate routes of similar length via Nacimiento Fergusson Road and Nacimiento Lake Drive, or Carmel Valley Road and Jolon Road, but calls to race representatives about what alternatives they are considering were not returned Tuesday.

Landslide brings mixed business

The Big Sur Chamber of Commerce is urging area residents and businesses to contact state and federal officials to hasten efforts to reopen the road.

"My best estimate for Big Sur alone, much less the Monterey Peninsula and San Luis Obispo communities, is that a South Coast closure will reduce Highway 1 traffic levels by at least 35 to 40 percent of normal," wrote Kirk Gafill, chamber president and general manager of the famed Nepenthe restaurant in Big Sur.

According to 2009 state traffic counts, about 3,500 vehicles a day use the highway north of Hearst Castle when averaged over the course of a year. The count at Garrapata Creek at the north end of Big Sur is 4,300 average daily trips.

But "peak month" figures — which don't specify which month — show more vehicles pass by Hearst Castle, 5,400, than through the north end of Big Sur, 5,100.

Gafill's letter says, "We need to ensure our elected officials are fully aware of the social and economic impact

of this year's highway closures on the Big Sur community, the northern San Luis Obispo County communities, and the Monterey Peninsula, to ensure they are providing Caltrans with both the mandate and the resources necessary to effect the timeliest reopening of the Alder Creek slide possible."

Ken Cooper, owner of the Bluebird Inn in Cambria and president of the Central Coast Hotel-Motel Association, said lodgings are reporting to him that business is down about 20 percent, but some don't have that large a drop.

Some shops and restaurants report they're getting good business from tourists who find themselves with a little spare time because their plans were altered by the road closure, according to Rody Salkeld of the Cambria Chamber of Commerce.

Ken Welch of Best Western Cavalier in San Simeon said, "We're holding our own. The ones we lose from the north we seem to gain from the south."

Nick Franco, superintendent of the State Parks district that includes Hearst Castle, said while he didn't have exact numbers available, "I think it has stabilized at this point, and people know what to expect and are planning accordingly."

John Fixler, the Castle's ticket office superintendent, said, "People who have their heart set on going to Hearst Castle are coming to Hearst Castle. We've been selling out. It's not noticeably different" compared to last year.

A representative of Ragged Point Inn said restaurant sales and room rentals are holding about even with last year.

Overhauling plans

Work to clear the slide south of Gorda was halted about 5 p.m. Monday, so Caltrans could "come up with a different game plan," according to Tim Winsor of Winsor Construction, the contractor on the landslide-clearing job.

He said conditions keep shifting as weather changes, topsoil dries and rocks and dirt continue to fall. "It's like having soapy or wet hands when you're trying to hold onto a dish. It's the same thing with rocks, mud and dirt. Everything's slippery."

A huge slide further north in 1983 kept the highway closed for 13 months, and Skinner Pierce was killed when falling dirt swept his loader into the ocean.

Winsor was working the north side of the slide Monday. He said, "It's really dangerous working underneath, because softball-and basketball-sized rocks keep coming down, hitting the loader."

In March, one of Winsor's Caterpillar loaders was severely damaged by a falling rock "the size of a 5-gallon bucket," at a landslide site at Limekiln Creek. The boulder went through the windshield and barely missed driver Chuck Molinari.