

Coping along the coast

New rains a concern as Big Sur adjusts

Larry Parsons, Monterey County Herald, 3-19-11

As heavy rains loomed for the next week for the Big Sur coast, an emergency contractor was lined up Friday for the slide just north of Bixby Bridge that has severed Highway 1 about 13 miles south of Carmel.

Without a transportation outlet to the north, the Big Sur community dealt with the tasks of daily life — from switching pharmacy prescriptions to more accessible locations to topping off propane tanks — thrown for a loop by the highway closure.

"The added concern is what is this weather going to bring," said Monterey County Supervisor Dave Potter, whose district includes the Big Sur coastal communities partially isolated by the Highway 1 closure.

County officials said up to an inch of rain was expected to hit the coast on Friday, .066 inches had fallen by 8p.m. More rain was forecast for Sunday and Wednesday. That could delay repair work on a 40-foot section of the highway that simply fell away three days ago before startled passers-by.

"We're still going to be closed for a month," Caltrans spokeswoman Susana Cruz said.

Caltrans engineers were back at the site Friday, and Cruz said paperwork and cost estimates for the emergency work were being prepared.

An afternoon Caltrans bulletin about highway status sounded much as it did 24 hours earlier — crews were assessing the slide, Big Sur businesses remained open, and temporary fixes were weeks away.

Caltrans said the hillside was stabilized, but crews were on the watch for any new movement.

For Big Sur residents south of the closure, getting groceries, picking up a prescription or going to the bank means traveling down Highway 1 to Cambria or going east over the mountains on the twisty Nacimiento-Fergusson Road to King City.

Sharen Carey, executive director of the Big Sur Health Center, said both trips take 90 minutes or longer. "People really have to plan ahead," she said.

Information about the slide and community responses were being exchanged on the popular BigSurKate blog. Postings on Friday ran the gamut from a video of the slide to pleas that people drive extra carefully on Nacimiento-Fergusson Road with more traffic anticipated.

"It does provide some challenges for the community," Carey said. "It's not impossible, but a little more difficult for people to coordinate everything they need."

The community, which is steeled to road closures, power outages, wildfires, mudslides and the like, usually pulls together when things get tough, Carey said.

"That's the upside of a disaster around here," she said. "We have a lot of people in our community committed to

helping out and being neighborly."

Several steps have been taken to get emergency responders into the semi-isolated area. An ambulance crew was dispatched to Big Sur on Thursday. Two sheriff's deputies are patrolling 24 hours a day on the coast.

"That's better coverage than usual," said sheriff's Cmdr. Mike Richards, but not unusual. "We've done similar things when floods isolated the area."

County emergency planner Sidney Reade said there are three options to get patients who need emergency medical care out of Big Sur.

They will be flown, if weather permits. Or they will be taken north to the closure, carried by foot across the slide area, and transferred to another ambulance. Or, she said, they will be taken south on Highway 1 by ambulance and, if possible, transferred to another ambulance coming from the Cambria area.

"This is not new ground," Reade said. "Sections of Big Sur become islands annually. This has worked smoothly in the past."

County officials also were trying to arrange to have a Pacific Gas & Electric Co. truck and crew in Big Sur to handle possible power outages.

Potter said his office was trying to work out a way for residents to walk around the slide site and reach bus service on the north side. There are possible alternate routes on private ranches, he said.

"We're feeling pretty confident. It's just making sure people are really prepared to get stocked up on basic supplies," said Kathleen Lee, Potter's chief aide.

Carey said some residents are well-prepared and ready "for the duration," while others are worried.

"Everyone's working together," she said. "We have no idea how long this is going to last. We won't know until we get through the next several days of rain."