

## Big Sur sky taxi

*Flights shuttle residents, workers over blocked highway*

**Kevin Howe, Monterey County Herald, 3-29-11**

With a third major mudslide reminding Big Sur residents how vulnerable they are to Highway 1 blockages, emergency helicopter service was launched Monday to link them with the Peninsula.

The latest mud and rock slide came down at Alder Creek, 38 miles south of Big Sur Village and 2.3 miles south of Gorda, blocking both lanes, said Susanna Cruz, spokeswoman for the state Department of Transportation.

Specialized Helicopters of Watsonville sent one of its fleet of light choppers to the Rocky Point Restaurant parking lot north of the slides, shuttling passengers to a landing zone next to the Little Sur River bridge.

The five-minute flight costs \$60 a head, and Specialized Helicopters found takers as soon as service began.

"Helicopters are big fun," said Stan Russell, executive director of the Big Sur Chamber of Commerce, which arranged the shuttle flights. The flights are tentatively scheduled to resume Friday from 10 a.m. to noon.

One passenger, Manuel Pelafox, an employee at Post Ranch Inn, drove a truck down from Monterey and was flying back to work. The vacation spot plans to station vehicles at either landing point to deliver supplies to the restaurant until the highway can be reopened, he said.

The helicopter being used at Rocky Point, a Robinson R44 Raven II, can carry three passengers with luggage limited to no more than 50 pounds, according to Specialized Helicopters. More items can be taken if there are fewer than three passengers.

Massage therapist Yoshi Sakai of Tokyo left the Monterey Peninsula at 4 a.m. Monday to keep an appointment in Big Sur, planning to drive south to Nacimiento-Fergusson Road and then north on Highway 1.

But she was turned back and came around with driver Glenn McKee of Pacific Grove to catch a helicopter ride at Rocky Point.

Crews are working to clear the Alder Creek slide, but no reopening time has been determined, Cruz said, adding that Caltrans should have a progress report today. The slide occurred just as Caltrans officials were reopening a section of the highway about 12 miles north near Limekiln State Park.

The 2-mile stretch of Highway 1 between Palo Colorado Road and Bixby Creek Bridge that collapsed March 16 remains closed for all travel, including emergency vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists, she said, and will remain so until at least mid-April.

In past years when Big Sur was isolated by slides, fixed-wing aircraft used Highway 1 near Point Sur Lighthouse as an airstrip, Russell said. That isn't the case this time because "it's still a useable road," he said. Vehicle access has been available to the south, and the Alder slide should be cleared soon.

"If we lose Nacimiento-Fergusson, it gets interesting," he said.

If the ticket price was relatively steep, chopper riders Monday at least got a perfect day for the brief flight, with clear skies and sunshine showing the coast at its best.