

# Calif. Highway 1: rainy weather plays havoc

Michael Cabanatuan, San Francisco Chronicle, 3-28-11

California's curvy coastal temptress - Highway 1 - falls apart when it gets wet.

Tiptoeing along perilous seaside cliffs, the state's famous scenic highway is especially susceptible to rain-induced geologic disruptions. Persistent precipitation soaks the soil, as it has this month, sends rocks or mud from steep slopes cascading onto the roadway, or causes the earth beneath the highway to slip away, sometimes sending the pavement plunging into the Pacific. Winter and spring road closures are common.

"Along with the beauty and majesty of the highway comes a lot of challenges in keeping the road open," said Colin Jones, a Caltrans spokesman for the Central Coast. "We've done a lot of preventive maintenance, but we've had steady rain, and all that water can cause slides and slip-outs."

Highway 1 runs from Dana Point in Orange County to Leggett in Mendocino County, but the winding stretches north and south of San Francisco offer the most dramatic views - and the most rainy-season drama.

This year is no exception. Heavy rains this month have caused closures on the north and south ends of Big Sur and in Sonoma County, and narrowed the highway to a single lane in Marin County.

Rains caused soil to slide from beneath Highway 1, just west of Green Gulch Farm, in Marin County on Tuesday. Caltrans engineers began drilling soil samples on Friday to determine what kind of repairs will be necessary.

While they're at work, until about 5 p.m. daily through at least Wednesday, a pilot car will lead drivers through the area. At night, southbound traffic is required to yield to northbound traffic, an arrangement that will continue after the drilling is done. The time to repair the highway has not yet been determined, said Caltrans spokesman Bob Haus.

A slide in Sonoma County last weekend also closed one lane for several hours while crews cleaned up the mess and erected a temporary retaining wall.

"It sort of goes with the territory for a coastal highway," Haus said.

## Big Sur cut off

The problems are far worse in Monterey County, where a 40-foot stretch of roadway in Big Sur collapsed into the Pacific on March 16, closing the highway between Big Sur and Carmel near the famous arched Bixby Bridge. Emergency repairs costing about \$2.5 million are under way, but are expected to take nearly a month.

The closures have all but stranded some area residents, who face a four- to five-hour detour to get around the missing chunk of highway to the north. Cyclists and pedestrians have also been barred from traversing the area. Jones said Caltrans has been working with residents to make sure they're able to get food, supplies and emergency access if needed.

"They're a pretty hardy bunch out there," he said. "And they've been through this before."

Thursday's daylong rains delivered even more isolation when a landslide at Limekiln Creek, about 25 miles south of Big Sur, dumped several tons of mud and rocks across the highway, closing it for at least two days and creating a roughly 40-mile stretch with no easy way in or out.

Caltrans crews had hoped to open the road by Thursday evening, but a huge boulder slammed into excavation equipment, stalling the operation. The cleanup work resumed Friday, and was likely to be completed over the weekend.

### **Blow to businesses**

Kirk Gafill, general manager of Nepenthe restaurant and president of the Big Sur Chamber of Commerce, said a quick reopening of the southern closure would minimize the impact on the tourist industry. The current closure has caused business at his restaurant to fall by about 90 percent, he said.

When El Niño storms slammed the coast and battered the highway in the past, closures to both the north and south forced most businesses to close until the road reopened.

With the highway open to the south, but closed to the north for the next month, Gafill said, business should be at about 30 to 60 percent of normal.

"If we can get through this 30-day window, we can get through this OK," he said.

Notably absent from the list of Highway 1 distress is Devil's Slide on the San Mateo County coast. That notorious stretch of road, which has been closed innumerable times, often for months, has held together since it was closed for four months and \$7 million of repairs in 2006 after a spring storm sent boulders as big as cars falling onto the highway, and the slide opened huge fissures in the pavement.

"We haven't had any problems at Devil's Slide," Haus said. "Knock on wood."

The tunnel being built around Devil's Slide, due to open early next year, should help keep that stretch of highway open even in the wettest weather.

"If we can make it another year," Haus said, "we won't have to worry about that anymore."