

Washout takes bite out of Highway 1

By CHRIS COUNTS

JUST WHEN everyone was sufficiently stressed out over the pandemic and politics, Mother Nature crashed the party Thursday afternoon and opened up a 150-foot-deep chasm smack dab in middle of Highway 1 in Big Sur.

The first sign of trouble came when Caltrans workers discovered debris coming across the road above Rat Creek, a relatively small watershed located 2 miles south of Esalen Institute — and 42 miles south of the Monterey Peninsula. Conditions deteriorated by sundown.

“A debris flow from the hillside above Rat Creek on Highway 1 on the Big Sur coast overwhelmed drainage infrastructure, flowed across the highway, and eroded the road, resulting in the complete loss of a segment of Highway 1 at that location,” Caltrans reported. “On Friday, Caltrans as-

essment crews and emergency contractors arrived at daybreak to discover that both lanes of the highway had washed out.”

More damage in Big Sur

The washout was the worst of an assortment of road hazards reported after several days of heavy wind and rain down the coast. “Caltrans and contractor crews working north and south of Rat Creek on Highway 1 continue to clear multiple debris piles, remove slides, remove accumulations of water, clear and repair drainage systems, and stabilize damaged sections of roadway at approximately 60 locations that were impacted by storm damage,” the state road agency announced. “Several of these locations still need to stabilize and dry out before final cleanup and repair work can restore the highway to allow for public use.

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PHOTO/KODIAK GREENWOOD

A washout at Rat Creek took out a big chunk of Highway 1 last week, and it's uncertain when the road will be repaired. The site was one of many along Highway 1 and Nacimiento-Fergusson Road to suffer damage from recent storms.

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HIGHWAY

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Damage to Highway 1 south of Rat Creek remains in such condition that it will delay the ability of residents who live there to return to their homes.”

The site is located below the burn scar of the recent Dolan Fire, which left behind thousands of acres of steep land stripped bare of erosion-controlling vegetation.

For now, Highway 1 is closed both north and south of the washout, with the boundaries of the closure in flux as repairs are made to the road. Only highway workers and locals are allowed to enter the closed area, and they could face construction delays. An evacuation order for the area was lifted Friday.

It’s too early to say when the road will reopen. “Engineering alternatives are being analyzed and data is being gathered, with no timeline available for the complete reopening at this time,” Caltrans added.

Late last week, Caltrans agreed to an emergency \$5

million contract with Papich Construction of San Luis Obispo County to assist with repairs.

County road also in bad shape

While the collapse of Highway 1 at Rat Creek is in the news, there’s been little coverage of the condition of Nacimiento-Fergusson Road, which has for the most part been closed since shortly after the Dolan Fire broke out in mid-August, 2020.

According to county spokesperson Maia Carroll, the road was “severely impacted” by recent storms because steep hillsides were stripped of erosion-controlling plants by the recent blaze. Carroll said county workers didn’t waste any time getting to work, and put in overtime to make the road passable.

“Debris from slides covered many areas of the roadway,” Carroll reported. “Heavy equipment was brought in, and crews worked from Thursday through Monday, and finally managed to clear one lane the road from Fort Hunter Liggett to Highway 1.”

The task wasn’t easy. “The county had to bring in a CAT 950 front-end loader and other heavy equipment

normally used in rock quarries to clear boulders from the road,” Carroll said.

Carroll noted that workers made contact with “land-locked” locals who were thrilled to see their arrival — and who might have remained stranded in their neighborhoods without the county clearing the road.

The road remains closed to the public but open to locals.

“Residents who need to use the road should be extremely careful, and be cautious about debris on the shoulder and slip outs on the roadway,” Carroll added. “Drive slowly and carefully — damage assessments are still in progress.”

Andrew Madsen of the United States Forest Service told The Pine Cone Thursday that he took a “virtual tour” of Nacimiento-Fergusson Road, and it showed 18 places where there was significant storm damage. He also noted that a crew from Fort Hunter Liggett is helping with repairs.

“In some places, there were gnarly debris flows, and in the other areas, the damage is more extensive,” Madsen said. “In some case, the road is washed away.”

Unhappy at the hermitage

At New Camaldoli Hermitage — which is located 8 miles south of the washout — general manager Rich Veum is worried it will be months before the monastery’s garbage will be picked up.

“Here we are cut off again on the South Coast, and the only essential service that has made some attempt to continue serving us is the USPS. The postmaster is saying he will deliver mail to us two times a week by driving all the way around,” Veum told The Pine Cone. “Neither UPS, Fed Ex or Waste Management have made plans to continue service in some way.”

“Big Sur Kate” Novoa also addressed the issue of mail in her blog.

“Andrew, our postmaster, asked me to pass on his assurance that during the closure at Rat Creek, he would be having mail delivered Tuesdays and Fridays for the duration for those of us south of Rat Creek,” Novoa reported. “Obviously, it is not carved in stone, as there are many factors that could affect this, but he was doing everything in his power to make sure that happens.”

Despite the damage to Highway 1, many businesses are open north of Coast Big Sur, along with State Parks day-use areas. South of Rat Creek, United States Forest Service campgrounds and day-use areas will open as the closure area along Highway 1 shrinks. Those staying at forest service campgrounds need reservations, which can be made at recreation.gov.

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