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Completion of U.S. Highway 20 project could be delayed until 2012

By Kendall S. Cable Of the News-Times



The Oregon Department of Transportation and Yaquina River Constructors are still undergoing a "negotiated suspension" of work on the Highway 20 realignment project, which could delay completion of the \$129.9-million project until as late as 2012. (Courtesy photo)

The Oregon Department of Transportation and Yaquina River Constructors are still undergoing a "negotiated suspension" of work, which could temporarily halt a portion of the \$129.9-million effort to straighten Highway 20 between Newport and Corvallis until 2009, moving its completion date possibly into 2012.

The negotiated suspension originated in March of 2007 when Yaquina River Construction's parent company, Granite Construction Incorporated, called for the halt of its contract after representatives identified 11 ancient landslides within the project's parameters. The suspension agreement stated the delay was to begin in September 2007 and conclude no earlier than June this year, allowing for the two entities to launch into efforts to identify the most cost-effective mitigation plan to build atop and maneuver around the temperamental terrain.

"At this point, ODOT and Granite are vigorously negotiating to work through all of the various issues," said ODOT spokesperson Joe Harwood. "If we are to conclude our negotiations in the next three or four weeks, there is a very good chance well be back to work this summer."

Harwood warned, however, that he would "not be surprised" if this portion of the project did not move forward this year, as it would take up to seven weeks to mobilize all of the equipment and subcontractors into place. With the coast's construction season running from June to August (due to the constraints of the coast's rugged weather), the window is closing.

What has to take place from now until the end of May, Harwood said, is for the two entities to agree on the pricing framework for the additional landslide work and how to apportion the costs; the type of landside mitigation strategy to build the roads and bridges through the landslide areas; equipment staging; construction phasing; and how to integrate landslide mitigation work through the remainder of the project.

"We know the clock is ticking," Harwood said. "We are doing our best to do everything we can to get these issues resolved and get back to work."

The Pioneer Mountain to Eddyville realignment project hit bumpy pavement when the Department of Environmental Quality fined ODOT \$90,000 and Granite Construction Incorporated with a \$240,000 bill for water quality violations due to the lack of erosion

controls, allowing for sediment to discharge into streams and wetlands, including Eddy, Trapp, Crystal, Little Elk, and Cougar creeks. It is ODOT's intention to ensure landslide mitigation will prevent this from occurring in the future.

Negotiations between ODOT and regulatory agencies such as the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Army Corps of Engineers, and the Department of State Lands also continue regarding modified permits to allow for additional landslide mitigation.

Regardless of the outcomes of all negotiations, ODOT will continue to work on other portions of the project beginning in June. A culvert bridge will replace a culvert in Elk City, which is to increase fish passage. On the west end of the project, new alignment and old alignment improvements will be smoothed out to make the road straighter and stronger. Also, a wetland mitigation project will commence on the east side of the project.

Harwood stressed that ODOT is mindful it is working with taxpayer money.

Money is exactly what companies such as Georgia-Pacific and grocery stores will lose as long as the final leg of the project is not completed. Semi trucks that measure 53 feet with sleeper cabs currently are precluded by law from traveling U.S. Highway 20 because the wheels cannot geometrically negotiate between the fog line and centerline of the road.

Georgia-Pacific Public Affairs Manager Tom Picciano said this forces trucks to add an additional 100 miles to their routes when driving to California. This means time and money for each additional mile.

"We would be very disappointed if there is any more delay in the completion of that final portion of Highway 20," Picciano said. "We urge all of the parties involved to assist rural and coastal Oregon to come to some agreement to get the completion as soon as possible."

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