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U.S. 20 project gets a shot of stimulus money

Posted by Lori Tobias, The Oregonian March 08, 2009 21:13PM

In 2006, ODOT and a contractor began a \$150 million project to straighten a treacherous 10-mile section of U.S. 20 on a popular route to the coast.

Environmental concerns halted the project in 2007, but an infusion of \$13.8 million in federal stimulus money has things moving again.

The project: In 2006, the Oregon Department of Transportation and contractor Granite Construction began a \$150 million project to straighten a treacherous 10-mile section of U.S. 20 between Pioneer Mountain and Eddyville, a popular route to the coast.

The new stretch would shave four miles off the current drive, open the road to 53-foot semitrailers -- currently not permitted on the tight curves -- and be expected to reduce the accident rate.

What happened: In 2007, the project came to a screeching halt after the Department of Environmental Quality fined ODOT \$90,000 and Granite Construction, doing business as Yaquina River Constructors, \$240,000 for water quality violations involving erosion that damaged salmon spawning grounds in the Yaquina River and its tributaries.

After nearly a year of negotiations, ODOT and Granite agreed on a plan to stabilize ancient landslides. Workers returned to the job last spring, setting a new completion date of late 2011.

What's new: The Oregon State Transportation Commission added \$13.8 million in federal stimulus money to the project. The extra cash will allow ODOT to make improvements on curves at the west end of the project that it had originally tabled because the repairs were too expensive.

"It would not have been fully up to standard," said ODOT Area 4 manager Vivian Payne. "This additional money allows us to make those curve improvements the right way."

It is also more environmentally friendly, Payne said, because they will replace a culvert with a bridge. "In the long run, it will be a better highway for users as well as a better environmental solution for fish and other resources."

What's ahead: ODOT is gearing up for the construction season and expects this summer to be the peak employment for the project. ODOT project manager Joe Squire says more than 300 workers could be on the project.

In the coming months, crews will complete the Willamette & Pacific Railroad and Yaquina River bridges and begin work on six remaining bridges, including one that will stand 200 feet high and stretch 1,000 feet and a second that will stand 95 feet high and span 600 feet, affording expansive views of the countryside.

"This is going to be one of the few highways that you'll be able to see the Coast Range from," Squire said.

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The Eddy B Bridge will stretch 750 feet long and stand 120 feet at its highest point. Except where sight distance is an issue, each of the eight bridges on the new section of U.S. 20 will have railings 10 inches higher than standard. The bridges were designed with 42-inch railings, in part to improve bicycle safety on the high spans.

