

## California's Relocation of Highway 1 in San Luis Obispo County

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North of the Piedras Blancas Light Station, California Highway 1 touches the sea. Decades of coastal erosion, exacerbated by rising sea levels, have brought segments of shoreline to the highway's edge. Where bluffs have receded most severely, only an artificial rock embankment and low concrete wall separate the ocean from the asphalt. Waves break over these barriers during periods of high swells, saturating the pavement and creating dangerous conditions.



High swells on California Highway 1.

For years, the California Coastal Commission authorized emergency repairs, but damage continued to occur. "Everyone agreed that something more had to be done over the long run," said Tami Grove, Coastal Program Manager at the Coastal Commission. Grove and her colleagues worked closely with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), California State Parks, and San Luis Obispo County officials to design a plan for relocating the highway

inland and avoiding costly repairs.

Planning was a challenge, as this part of the coast contains sensitive ecological resources and the adjacent land is privately-owned. The final realignment project, approved by the Coastal Commission, sets the stage for Caltrans to relocate nearly three miles of Highway 1 beyond the estimated 100-year erosion line. Through an agreement with private landowners and non-governmental organizations, the area between the coast and relocated highway will add 73 acres to Hearst San Simeon State Park. This opens new opportunities for beach access and affordable visitor facilities, such as a public campground. The project will also build 3.5 new miles of the California Coastal Trail. As a condition of approval, the Coastal Commission requires Caltrans to mitigate construction impacts by restoring more than eight acres of coastal wetland and 21 acres of coastal prairie, a grassland plant community that provides habitat for many rare and endangered species. Once construction is complete, the old concrete barriers will be removed to re-establish natural coastal processes.

Cooperation was a key to this success. The Coastal Commission worked extensively with other state and local agencies, as well as stakeholders from the general public, to assist in the development of a viable project. As part of this collaboration, the Coastal Commission used its coastal management authority to administer a single development permit for all aspects of the project, streamlining the overall regulatory review. This increased the efficiency of obtaining project approval and eased the administrative burden for the Coastal Commission's partners.

This project reduces risk from coastal hazards and advances California's other coastal management goals, including environmental protection, coordination among government agencies, public engagement, equitable access to the coast, and responsible development. "The approach we used at Piedras Blancas has become a model for similarly situated projects in other parts of the State," said Grove. For example, the Coastal Commission

recently approved a project at Surfer's Beach in San Mateo County for temporary protection of Highway 1 and a long-term development plan for that shoreline. The Commission is also collaborating with Caltrans in Santa Cruz County, where the replacement of a deteriorated bridge will help respond to erosion threats and restore critical spawning grounds for Coho salmon.