

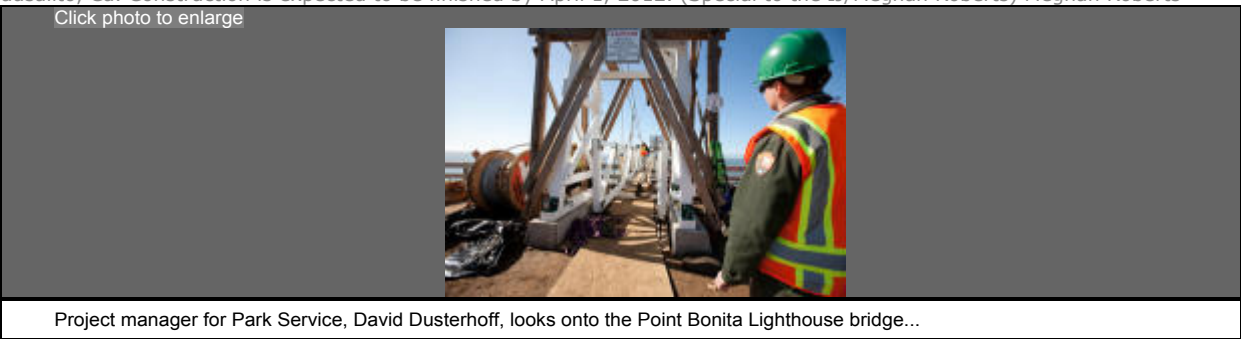
Point Bonita Lighthouse bridge work nears an end

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Point Bonita Lighthouse bridge undergoing construction on Wednesday, February 14, 2012 in the Marin Headlands in Sausalito, Ca. Construction is expected to be finished by April 1, 2012. (Special to the IJ/Meghan Roberts) Meghan Roberts
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Project manager for Park Service, David Dusterhoff, looks onto the Point Bonita Lighthouse bridge...

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WORK ON A NEW suspension bridge that takes visitors to the Point Bonita Lighthouse at the southwest tip of Marin County is nearing completion.

In late 2010, Golden Gate National Recreation Area officials stopped public access across the old 57-year-old bridge after a Federal Highway Administration report concluded that keeping it open posed a danger to the public.

Parts of the bridge were rusting after years of exposure to corrosive salt air. Toward the end of its life, only two people at a time were allowed on the span out of concern more weight would damage it.

For the past several months crew have been working on replacing the 156-foot span with what is essentially a replica at a cost of \$1.9 million. It is set to open April 1.

"The goal is to have a bridge that will last 50 years," said David Dusterhoff, who is heading up the project. "But there are no guarantees about slope stability."

So the project is also stabilizing the slopes with sprayed-on concrete to better hold the span in place. That has required some workers in safety gear to hang off the side of the cliffs, more than 100 feet above the roiling Pacific Ocean.

"I wouldn't want to be doing it," said Al Greening, a volunteer at the lighthouse, with a laugh. "They are down there drilling holes into the rock and putting in long rods for support. They are all experienced and have done a great job."

The towers, main cables and decking have all been erected, but the elements need to be tied down. The span also needs a coat of paint before it is ready for the public.

"It will look very similar to the old bridge, white with the forest-green steel," Dusterhoff said. "We have Coast Guard plans from 1954 and that's what the highway administration used for the design. There were some minor tweaks, and improvements, but it is similar."

Up until 1940 the lighthouse could be reached without a bridge, but erosion caused a trail leading to the lighthouse to crumble into the sea. A wooden walkway was installed, but when that became treacherous the suspension bridge was built in 1954. This lighthouse is the only one in the country that must be reached via a suspension bridge.

The span — intended to mirror the design of the Golden Gate Bridge — underwent repairs in 1979 and again in 1991, but its metal became too rusted by the sea air for another repair.

Lighthouses — including Bonita — are part of the history of the West Coast. After the Gold Rush of 1849, San Francisco became a major port and lighthouses were needed to guide ships through the hazardous Golden Gate.

Alcatraz Island's light showed the way for



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ships directly in front of the Gate and Fort Point's lighthouse marked the southern edge of San Francisco Bay, but another lighthouse was needed to the north to make the entrance recognizable for ships sailing up the coast from the south, according to the GGNRA. The Point Bonita Lighthouse — then the third on the West Coast — was finished in 1855.

Initially it was built on a 300-foot-tall ridge near what is now a parking lot, but ship captains complained it was often obscured by thick fog.

"Once they figured out the fog, they knew it was not the right spot and had to move it," Greening said.

In 1877 it was rebuilt at a lower elevation, 124 feet above the water.

Like other lighthouses, Point Bonita's has a glass prism Fresnel lens, a light system developed by French physicist Augustin Fresnel in 1822. The Fresnel lens is still used today. Additionally, an electric fog horn is used, sending out two blasts every 30 seconds.

Point Bonita is still an active lighthouse. The U.S. Coast Guard maintains it, while the park service provides access to visitors.

Though the reconstructed bridge is still off-limits to the public, the trail to the bridge remains open, offering expansive views of the Pacific Ocean. The tunnel to the suspension bridge is open from 12:30 to 3:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

"It will be great once the span is done," said Greening, who has been documenting the bridge work with his camera; his photos can be seen at the Headlands Visitors Center at Fort Barry. "And now there won't be a limit to the number of people who can be on it at once."

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