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Crews battle rock slides

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Crews battle rock slides

By Sam Womack/Staff Writer swomack@santamariatimes.com Santa Maria Times | Posted: Tuesday, August 31, 2010 11:46 pm | (0) Comments

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AIS Construction workers lay chain link fencing suspended from a helicopter across the

face of one of the rocky hills near the tunnel on the northbound side of the 101 in Gaviota on Tuesday as part of a Caltrans effort to decrease the chance of a rock slide. //Leah Thompson/Staff

About a dozen workers, visible only by their florescent yellow vests, wrestled hundreds of feet of wire fencing into place Tuesday while dangling from a steep cliff, in order to better protect drivers from falling rocks on Highway 101 just south of the Gaviota Tunnel.

The employees of AIS Construction of Carpinteria rappelled from the tip of the mountain, which stands at about 200 feet and juts up just north of the Gaviota rest stop along the northbound lanes, and anchored large strips of fencing delivered by a helicopter.

Beginning at about 9 a.m., traffic along both lanes of the highway was delayed intermittently for 15 to 30 minutes each time the helicopter went airborne with the fencing for the project.

The mesh barrier, reinforced with cable, was the next phase of a project from Caltrans to reduce the danger to drivers from boulders falling onto the roadway.

“The slope became more active in late June,” when a 1-ton rock tumbled down the cliff and into a trailer towed by a vehicle, said Bill Leu, the project’s design engineer with Caltrans.

Over the past few months, Caltrans has been focusing on several safety features in the area, such as fencing at the base of the cliff, rock scaling, which consists of knocking down loose rocks, and placing netting over the cliff to help secure the dirt and rock.

The double-twisted wire mesh was chopped into strips ranging from 150 feet to 70 feet in length, and then delicately draped over the mountain’s face by a red ARIS helicopter.

The workers scrambled across the mountain, suspended by ropes and harnesses, to grab the web-like chain-link as it glittered in the sun and secure it to the mountain.

During the process, some large rocks, dirt and debris fairly flew off the cliff and onto the highway, propelled by the helicopter’s blast of air.

Traffic was halted in both directions, because of the dangerous projectiles and the low-flying helicopter, which hovered a few hundred feet over the highway and dragged the mesh fencing near power lines, Leu said.

“It’s all to protect the public,” he added.

AIS Construction was awarded the \$700,000 contract for the project.

For traffic updates on other state highway projects in Santa Barbara County, call Caltrans District 5 at 568-0858 or visit www.dot.ca.gov/dist05.

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