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Reported by Jenna Sachs

Giant Nail Gun is Possible Bliss Road Solution



After last month's record flooding, the Minnesota Department of Transportation has brought in some new technology to repair damaged slopes along three major roadways. On Friday, La Crosse officials visited a work site on Highway 14 in Winona, to determine if the same technology would help repair Bliss Road.

The technology is called the soil nail launcher, and it works by driving long nails into the side of a roadway slope to stabilize the ground, at a speed of 250 miles per hour. The technology has only been used in the U.S. for six years, and there are only four soil nail launchers total.

"It's a compressed air cannon based on declassified military technology," explained Colby Barrett, vice president of Soil Nail Launcher, Inc. "It shoots 1 1/2 inch diameter, 20 foot long steel tubes into the ground."

Public works officials from La Crosse are considering several methods for repairing Bliss Road. They say if they choose to employ the soil nail launcher, it would only be on certain parts of the road.

"Knowing that they were in the area, we just wanted to see it in operation," said Tony Hutchens of the La Crosse Public Works department. "Bliss Road has a number of different types of failures, and some of the areas are similar to [highway 14] and have potential."

Minnesota Department of transportation engineer Nelrae Succio said they chose to use the soil nail launcher on highways 14, 61, and 76 in southeastern Minnesota for several reasons, including cost effectiveness and minimal environmental disruption.

"This seemed to be one [option] that was less intrusive, we could get it done in a shorter time frame, and it seemed to be successful in other parts of the country," said Succio.

"A month after we've left, you wouldn't know the soil launcher have been there," said Barrett.

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Barret says finishing an entire project with the soil nail launcher typically takes four to six weeks, and usually doesn't require shutting down an entire roadway. In a normal day, workers can shoot about 100 nails into an area of slope.

"We've actually scheduled for them to come to La Crosse next week, and walk Bliss Road with us, and see just what they think could work," said Hutchens.

Currently, the La Crosse Public Works Department is working on financing the Bliss Road project. They're waiting for FEMA to come and estimate the damage, before going to the city council with their proposal.



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