

## Controversial Niles Canyon Project Reopened for Comment



*Creative Commons photo by [John K.](#)*

*by Isaura Linares — published June 03, 2011*

**Update (June 7, 2011)** - Alameda Creek Alliance has now filed suit against Caltrans, citing inadequate environmental review of the project described below. You can download a PDF of their press release or full lawsuit from [alamedacreek.org](http://alamedacreek.org).

After months of protests from local environmental activists and some government officials, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is reopening the public comment period for one of three controversial Niles Canyon highway improvement projects on Highway 84 east of Fremont.

Caltrans says the project--which involves removing trees, widening roads, and building retaining walls--is needed to reduce traffic accidents in the scenic canyon, where Alameda Creek runs from the town of Sunol to Fremont. But the Alameda Creek Alliance and other critics charge that widening the highway will damage the health of the stream, whose 700-square-mile watershed is the second-largest feeding into San Francisco Bay.

"Removal of the trees will destabilize the stream banks, cause warmer stream temperatures and remove cover and root structures used by trout and frogs to escape from predators," says Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "Placing retaining walls and rip-rap in the stream channel and floodplain will destroy habitat and accelerate stream flow, causing erosion downstream and on opposite banks."

Though Caltrans first closed the comment period last October, the public can again comment through July 7 on the second phase of the project, which covers the major construction in the middle of the canyon. That work involves cutting almost 500 additional trees and adding nearly two miles of retaining wall in the creek and floodplain.

We **reported in January 2011** that Caltrans planned to complete review of public comments by late spring 2011.

In an email, Caltrans spokesperson Allyn Amsk said, "(Caltrans) decided to reopen the comment period for the Niles Canyon II Safety Improvement project in order to consider additional public comments from individuals and organizations who did not respond in the initial comment period but wanted their comments considered and included in the final environmental document."

Amsk says Caltrans is also planning to hold meetings with stakeholder groups to address specific concerns about the project.

"Throughout this process," wrote Amsk, "Caltrans has been committed to being a good steward of the Bay Area's natural resources and strives to balance this commitment with our priority to ensure safe highways for the motoring public, bicyclists and pedestrians."

A related project in the canyon started early this spring with the removal of close to 100 trees. Caltrans will resume work on June 15 to remove tree stumps and start work on the 1,600 feet of retaining wall in the lower canyon.

Alameda Creek Alliance has a **page about its objections** to Caltrans's work in Niles Canyon. You can also download the **official documents** about the project.

Comments can be submitted to **nilescanyonprojects@dot.ca.gov** or sent by mail to Caltrans District 4, Attn: V. Shearer, PO Box 23660 MS 8B, Oakland, CA 94623-0660. Comments must be received by 5 p.m. on July 7.