

Caltrans plan to widen Niles Canyon Road delayed

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June 24, 2011



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

A trial will determine if Caltrans will have to analyze the environmental effects of the Niles Canyon project.

Caltrans' plans to widen Niles Canyon Road will be delayed at least until 2012 after a judge ruled Thursday in favor of an environmental group trying to halt the project.

Alameda County Superior Court Judge Frank Roesch issued a preliminary injunction stopping Caltrans from working on the \$80 million project until after a trial, which will likely occur near the end of 2011.

"We knew we were right. Now the judge has agreed with us," said Jeff Miller of the Alameda Creek Alliance, which filed the lawsuit earlier this month. "This effectively means no construction in Niles Canyon this year."

The lawsuit demands that Caltrans do further environmental studies of the project, which adds retaining walls, shoulders and other improvements to Highway 84 through scenic Niles Canyon between Fremont and Sunol.

The project would harm habitat for the endangered Alameda whipsnake, red-legged frog and steelhead trout, according to the lawsuit. Instead of widening the road, Caltrans should add stop lights, rumble strips and lower the speed limit to make the road safer, Miller said.

Caltrans spokeswoman Traci Ruth had no comment on the ruling.

Caltrans has been planning for 10 years to widen Niles Canyon Road, which officials call one of the deadliest thoroughfares in the region. From 1998 to 2008, the road saw 436 crashes resulting in 13 deaths, according to a Caltrans study.

The trial will determine whether Caltrans needs to conduct an environmental impact report on the widening project and include more public input.

Overall, the project calls for the removal of about 600 trees and partial filling of the creekbed.

The city of Fremont has also opposed the project, citing the lack of public input and the environmental damage to historic Niles Canyon, home of the Niles Canyon Railway and the site of numerous Charlie Chaplin films.

"Niles Canyon is a state treasure that must be protected from Caltrans' devastating project," Mayor Bob Wasserman wrote in a May letter to Gov. [Jerry Brown](#).