

Fremont hopes truck ban will spare scenic road

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FREMONT -- Niles Canyon roadwork protests that began Saturday night are scheduled to continue this week as Caltrans crews cut down trees in preparation for a project to widen and improve Niles Canyon Road.

"I see this as a type of environmental vandalism," Alameda Creek Alliance Director Jeff Miller said. His group is looking at legal options to stop tree removal along the two-lane highway, a state-designated scenic route that meanders from the Niles district to Interstate 680 near Sunol.

Meanwhile, Fremont officials have begun efforts to ban trucks on Niles Canyon Road, a move they hope will improve safety while eliminating the need for the proposed safety measures, which they fear will diminish the canyon's beauty.

Caltrans has proposed three projects totaling about \$80 million, citing above-average numbers of fatal injury collisions on the road.

The first two Caltrans projects would widen much of Niles Canyon Road, removing more than 400 trees and building more than two miles of retaining walls in order to widen road shoulders, add a center median and soften sharp curves. The third project, scheduled to begin in 2013, would replace Alameda Creek Bridge.

Preliminary work on the first project began Saturday with the removal of trees in an area about a mile east of Mission Boulevard. More tree removal is scheduled this week, in preparation for the road widening and construction of a left-turn pocket at Palomares Road in spring, Caltrans officials said.

Fremont officials said they had no record of Caltrans notifying them about the first project, and that it's too late to stop it.

However, about a half-dozen protesters drove into the canyon Saturday night as the tree removals began. "We're going to try to be there every day of the week," said Kimberly Harbin, of Fremont.

The city is trying to stop the second project, scheduled to begin next year, which would result in the removal of many more trees and the installation of more cement retaining walls on a 4.4-mile stretch of the road.

In October, Fremont asked Caltrans for an alternative plan to "improve safety without such intrusive impacts on the scenic character of Niles Canyon."

The project is undergoing review, said Caltrans spokesman Allyn Amsk. Caltrans must respond to comments from Fremont and other agencies as part of its environmental review for the second project.

In an effort to get Caltrans to consider less costly and environmentally impactful safety measures, Fremont last week approved a \$30,000 study to ban trucks on Niles Canyon Road.

According to a Caltrans study, trucks account for 2.5 percent of the road's traffic on the road, but are involved in 38 percent of the collisions.

Caltrans would have to approve a truck ban, which likely would be opposed by the commercial trucking industry, Fremont Public Works Director Jim Pierson said.

The canyon played a key role in both the transcontinental railroad and the silent film industry. It is also critical to the local watershed and efforts to restore steelhead trout runs, Miller said.