

Caltrans removes native trees in Niles Canyon, more planned

Submitted By Jeff Miller, Alameda Creek Alliance

Contractors working for the California Department of Transportation began what some term "an act of environmental vandalism" late Saturday night along Alameda Creek, cutting nearly 50 native trees along the creek corridor in lower Niles Canyon. CalTrans plans to continue cutting native trees and is pursuing a project to remove hundreds more along the creek throughout the scenic canyon as part of a highly controversial and environmentally destructive road widening of Highway 84 through Niles Canyon. Niles residents and other interested parties held a protest Saturday night, March 5, to raise community awareness.

"We intend to stop this stupidity and destruction of the trees in the creek corridor by CalTrans," said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "They are cutting 40-foot oaks and sycamores along the Alameda Creek riparian zone, which is important habitat for fish and wildlife. The proposed highway widening project will not reduce traffic accidents, but it will make Niles Canyon more dangerous for drivers and in the process harm Alameda Creek, degrade fish habitat and jeopardize decades of restoration efforts, blight a designated scenic highway, and ruin the natural beauty of Niles Canyon."

CalTrans plans to continue cutting trees this week and will cut hundreds more native trees from the creek corridor throughout the canyon and build nearly two miles of cement retaining walls adjacent to Alameda Creek as part of an \$80 million Niles Canyon "safety improvement" project the agency claims is necessary to improve highway and bicycle safety.

However, state safety statistics show that Niles Canyon does not have a relatively high accident rate and, in fact, is below the state average. Those opposed to the project are convinced that the project may actually increase traffic fatalities by allowing cars to travel at higher speeds through the canyon.

The City Council of Fremont voted earlier this month to advocate banning large trucks from Niles Canyon, since trucks cause a disproportionate number of traffic accidents (38%) in the canyon and most of the fatal accidents. Trucks often use the canyon to avoid the truck scales on Highway 680, contributing to unsafe truck traffic.

"Spending \$80 million on a project to make a road safe, when hard data indicates that the road in question is already safer than average, is the quintessential example of government waste and mismanagement," said Niles resident Kimberly Harbin. "No wonder the state has to extend tax hikes while cutting money for education, the disabled, the elderly, Medicaid, childcare, and other worthy causes."

"Niles Canyon Road and the historic train provide important links to this area's past, and there is a spiritual connection to the canyon that will disappear when it becomes just another funnel for speeding traffic," said Michelle Powell, a local resident organizing opposition to the project. "There will be economic hardships in local communities if this project goes through. Niles Canyon is more than a blip in somebody's regional traffic scheme and should be treasured, not destroyed. This is a waste of millions of taxpayer dollars at a time we can least afford it. We call on our elected state and federal representatives to stop this project."

Tree cutting is part of the first phase of a massive three-part Caltrans "safety improvement" project in Niles Canyon. Those opposed to the project believe that Caltrans split the environmental analysis into three reviews to make environmental impacts appear smaller. Significant public opposition to the project surfaced during the second part of the environmental review last fall. The Alameda Creek Alliance, City of Fremont, Sunol Citizen's Advisory Committee, California Native Plant Society and Citizen's Committee to Complete the Refuge are opposing the project or commented on the inadequacy of the environmental review. In August the Regional Water Quality Control Board announced it "would be unlikely to issue the necessary approvals for this project" due to significant environmental impacts. The second phase is scheduled to begin in 2012.

The project would widen much of Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680 to provide 12-foot lanes, a 2-foot median, and 2-foot to 8-foot shoulders. The proposed median barriers, increased radius of curves, new roadway shoulders and guard rails, and more than four miles of huge cement retaining walls and rip-rap would require cutting 439 native trees from the Alameda Creek riparian corridor. The retaining walls, earthmoving for cut and fill and rip-rap would harm important habitat for steelhead trout, California red-legged frog, Alameda whipsnake, rare sycamore forest habitat, and other native wildlife.

Less environmentally damaging alternative solutions have been proposed. CalTrans has not evaluated such measures as installing radar speed signs, median barriers, and rumble strips, focusing on localized problem areas, trimming or removing selected trees, or other remedies within the existing roadway footprint.

Alameda Creek is an 'anchor watershed' considered regionally significant for restoration of threatened steelhead trout to the entire Bay Area. Since 1997, numerous organizations and agencies have cooperated on restoration projects to allow migratory fish from the Bay to reach spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek. Thirteen fish passage improvement projects, including dam removals, construction of fish ladders, and installation of fish screens, have been completed in the watershed since 2001. Several more projects in the lower creek are expected to be completed by 2011-2013, allowing steelhead to migrate upstream into Niles Canyon and the upper watershed for the first time in half a century.

For more information, contact Alameda Creek Alliance at (510) 499-9185 or visit www.alamedacreek.org or www.savenilescanyon.org