

## CONSERVATION GROUPS, LOCAL RESIDENTS BLAST PROPOSED HIGHWAY WIDENING IN NILES CANYON

*Project Would Cut Native Trees, Harm Alameda Creek and Mar  
Scenic Beauty of the Canyon*



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**Sunol, CA** – The California Department of Transportation will close the public comment period next Thursday on the draft Environmental Impact Report for a controversial proposal to widen Highway 84 through Niles Canyon, an unnecessary and damaging project that would cut 439 native trees and build nearly two miles of cement retaining walls adjacent to Alameda Creek. The Alameda Creek Alliance and California Native Plant Society are submitting formal comments this week opposing and questioning the need for the project, and Caltrans has received written comments and heard testimony from hundreds of local residents against the project during public hearings in Sunol and Fremont earlier this month.

“The impacts of this folly on Alameda Creek, habitat for endangered species, and the scenic and aesthetic values of Niles Canyon are unacceptable,” said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. “The need for highway widening and damaging the creek corridor is unproven and the environmental review fails to meet state and federal legal requirements. We insist that the project be withdrawn.”

The proposed Niles Canyon Safety Improvement Project would construct a median barrier, increase curve radii, create new roadway shoulders, install guard rails, and place retaining walls and rip-rap along more than four miles of State Route 84 in upper Niles Canyon. It would require cutting 439 native trees from the Alameda Creek riparian corridor and pouring nearly two miles of concrete retaining walls, some adjacent to Alameda Creek. Along with cutting and filling in the canyon for retaining walls and road shoulders and installing rip-rap down-slope of retaining walls, this would destroy and impact important habitat for steelhead trout, California red-legged frogs, Alameda whipsnakes, rare sycamore forest habitat, and other native wildlife.

“Caltrans should hold another public hearing before they close the comment period, since the agency stated they will not respond to the extensive public comment from the last two meetings,” said Ralph Kanz, Conservation Director with the Alameda Creek Alliance. “Significant issues were raised at both meetings that must be addressed in the environmental review, and Caltrans is trying to ignore these problems.”

“People use Niles Canyon Road because it provides a link to history 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 who has organized opposition to the project. “There will be economic hardships in the towns on both ends of the canyon when people no longer use the road to decompress from daily life - people won’t stop in Sunol, people won’t take that winding drive to get on the historic train ride, people

won't go through to Niles to visit and shop. Niles Canyon is more than a blip in somebody's regional traffic scheme and should be treasured, not destroyed.”

The proposed project is ostensibly for highway and bicycle safety, but safety statistics cited by Caltrans show that Niles Canyon does not have a relatively high accident rate, and in fact is below the state average. Fatal accidents are a problem in the project area, but Caltrans has not shown that the project would reduce fatalities, and it may actually increase them by allowing cars to travel at higher speeds through the canyon. Caltrans statistics indicate that 2.5% of the traffic in Niles Canyon is trucks, yet 38% of the accidents there involve trucks. Local residents feel that one way to improve road safety would be to limit truck traffic since it is an open secret that trucks often use the canyon to avoid the truck scales on 680, contributing to possible overloaded and unsafe truck traffic. The EIR acknowledges that the project is inconsistent with a scenic highway and notes the proposed upslope walls “will remain a highly prominent and, in some locations, visually dominant feature of the Niles Canyon corridor.”

The EIR did not evaluate less environmentally damaging alternatives such as trimming or removing selected trees, installing radar speed signs, median barriers, and rumble strips, focusing on localized problem areas, or other measures within the existing roadway footprint. The EIR did not fully analyze cumulative impacts to Alameda Creek, riparian habitat, endangered species habitat, water quality, hydrology, or scenic values of the project, especially in conjunction with three other current or pending Caltrans projects in Niles Canyon, and did not have the proper level of analysis to receive federal permits. In August the Regional Water Quality Control Board sent a letter to Caltrans stating the agency “would be unlikely to issue the necessary approvals for this project” due to significant environmental impacts.

Alameda Creek is considered to be an ‘anchor watershed’ for steelhead trout, regionally significant for restoration of the threatened ocean-going trout to the entire Bay Area. Since local steelhead were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 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, aimed at allowing steelhead and other anadromous fish to reach suitable spawning and rearing habitat. Several more fish passage projects in the lower creek are expected to be completed by 2011-2013, allowing steelhead to migrate freely upstream into Niles Canyon, the Sunol Valley, the Arroyo del la Laguna and Arroyo Valle tributaries, and upper Alameda Creek, for the first time in half a century.

*The Alameda Creek Alliance ([www.alamedacreek.org](http://www.alamedacreek.org)) is a community watershed group with over 1,750 members, dedicated to protecting and restoring the natural ecosystems of the Alameda Creek watershed. The Alameda Creek Alliance has been working to restore steelhead trout and protect endangered species in the Alameda Creek watershed since 1997.*