

Destroying Alameda Creek

A Caltrans road-widening project will cut down more than four hundred trees, and could ruin restored habitat for steelhead and salmon.

By Nate Seltenrich

The Alameda Creek Alliance has an admittedly narrow aim: securing safe passage and spawning habitat for wild steelhead and salmon along Alameda Creek, the East Bay's largest and longest waterway. The nonprofit formed in 1997 after steelhead trout on the Central California coast were listed as a federally threatened species, and has spent the last fourteen years working on more than a dozen fish-passage projects along Alameda Creek – including removing dams and barriers, building fish ladders, stabilizing stream banks, and planting native flora. But in February, the organization's efforts butted up against a Caltrans highway-widening project through Niles Canyon outside Sunol that has already led to the removal of more than eighty mature trees along the creek.

According to Caltrans, the \$88 million project is designed to improve safety along a 4.5-mile stretch of Niles Canyon Road, also known as State Highway 84, as it winds its way through wooded Niles Canyon. The route, heavily trafficked by commuters, truckers, and bicyclists, saw 436 collisions between 1998 and 2008, resulting in thirteen deaths and 342 injuries. The California Highway Patrol has also complained that because the road lacks a shoulder, it's unsafe for officers to pull over motorists.

But Alameda Creek Alliance founder and Executive Director Jeff Miller isn't convinced of the project's merits. Nor are many other local residents. Instead, they say, widening the highway will only add to the route's accident rate by allowing more traffic at higher speeds, all while degrading the canyon's natural beauty through the removal of more than four hundred native sycamores, big-leaf maples, live oaks, and willows.

Cutting down so many trees could have pronounced effects on the Alameda Creek corridor by accelerating erosion, eliminating shade and food sources, and impacting habitat for the fish as well as for birds, the Western pond turtle, and the federally protected California red-legged frog and Alameda whipsnake. Caltrans' mitigation efforts call for replanting felled trees at a ratio as high as five-to-one, but many rare natives would be lost, and it would take decades for the new trees to achieve the usefulness of those they replaced. "It's an incredibly stupid project," Miller said. "To destroy a stream we spent a decade and a half trying to restore, it's just offensive."

Caltrans' plans also call for both concrete retaining walls and rip-rap, looser rock walls used for erosion control, along two miles of Alameda Creek. This could potentially result in accelerated flows downstream and increased erosion on opposite banks. "That's just going to ruin the entire hydrology," Miller said. "It will make many areas unsuitable for trout."

While Miller is perhaps the most vocal protector of the creek and its watershed, his organization has not been alone in efforts to restore it.

In 1999, the Alameda Creek Alliance helped spur the formation of the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup, a coalition of seventeen agencies that have pledged their support to establishing a wild steelhead and salmon run on Alameda Creek, which flows 45 miles from the mountains east of San Jose to the bay near the city of Newark. Members include the East Bay Regional Parks District, the California Department of Fish and Game, and PG&E.

Caltrans' project comes at a particularly bad time for the Alameda Creek restoration effort, with two breakthrough fish-passage projects scheduled for the coming years. In 2013, a new fish ladder below Fremont BART should open up much of the watershed for migratory fish, and in 2015, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, another workgroup member, has committed to increasing flows from the upstream Calaveras Dam, dramatically improving conditions for steelhead and other cold-water fish.

The creek was last known to harbor full salmon and steelhead runs in the early-Sixties, before urban development impeded access to spawning grounds. Still, adult steelhead have been documented attempting to migrate upstream during recent winters, but have been blocked by a concrete weir just below the BART station. When that's removed, a passable Niles Canyon would provide the fish access to spawning grounds miles upstream.

On hold until creek flows recede in June, Caltrans' road-widening work comprises three phases and is scheduled to be completed in the fall of 2016. Its first phase was permitted under the California Environmental Quality Act using a Negative Declaration, a document that affirms that the project is not likely to have a significant effect on the environment.

Miller considers this decision illegal, and says he may pursue legal action.

A draft environmental impact report was issued last July for the project's second phase, which would begin in fall 2013 and involve the removal of hundreds more trees and the installation of retaining walls. Caltrans spokesman Allyn Amsk confirmed that the agency received more than two hundred comments expressing concern about the project's impacts. "Caltrans will continue to work with the community to alleviate their concerns," he said.

Meanwhile, opposition to the project continues to grow. Grassroots neighborhood organization Save Niles Canyon has organized hundreds of residents and is planning a public protest for Saturday, April 9, at 3 p.m. at the corner of Mission Boulevard and Niles Canyon Road in Fremont.

Officials with the City of Fremont have also gotten involved, proposing that Caltrans ban trucks from the road to improve safety without undertaking major construction.

Both have joined Miller in calling for the project to be put on hold until a resolution is reached.