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Statewide Coalition Opposes Caltrans' Environmentally Damaging Highway-Widening Projects

Northern Cal. Groups Call on Caltrans to Halt Construction on Willits Bypass

SACRAMENTO, *Calif.*— Two-dozen conservation and community organizations are joining together to take on irresponsible and damaging highway-widening projects around the state by the California Department of Transportation. The Caltrans Watch coalition cites wasteful spending, institutionalized disregard of environmental regulations designed to protect natural resources, and a pattern of refusal to address local community concerns. A dozen of the groups are calling on Caltrans to halt construction on the controversial Willits Bypass project in Mendocino County.

"With devastating budget cuts to education, health and social services and the state park system, how can Caltrans squander \$350 million on five unnecessary highway widening projects in Northern California, with severe environmental impacts?" asked Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity. "Someone needs to give 'em a brake. Where's the oversight and accountability to rein in the pervasive problems at Caltrans, like refusal to consider reasonable alternatives to massive highway projects, shoddy environmental review, no transparency, faulty data and disregard for public input?"

"The Willits community is coming to realize what a disaster the Willits Bypass will be for our environment and our town," said Ellen Drell of the Willits Environmental Center. "The project should be stopped until Caltrans adequately evaluates less damaging alternatives. We want our transportation dollars and construction jobs directed toward locally appropriate infrastructure that doesn't bankrupt the state, further trash our natural resources or ignore the \$300 billion highway maintenance backlog."

"From the wild canyons of the Smith River, through the redwood parks of Humboldt, to the wetlands headwaters of the Eel River at Willits, Caltrans is running roughshod over the North Coast," said Natalynne Delapp of the Environmental Protection Information Center. "Local communities are trying to engage the agency to develop appropriate transportation solutions, but Caltrans continues to bulldoze us with archaic projects straight out of the 1950s, that benefit only a limited group of economic interests."

Despite a pending lawsuit filed by conservation groups challenging the Willits Bypass — a proposed four-lane freeway to be built through sensitive wetlands around the community of Willits — Caltrans has stated its intention to cut down mature oak forests, remove brush and destroy riparian vegetation along critical salmon streams before the case can be heard in federal court this summer. State Sen. Noreen Evans earlier this

month sent a letter to Caltrans echoing community concerns over whether there is a need for a four-lane project, why other alternatives or routes were not seriously examined, and if less environmentally destructive solutions to address local traffic congestion were feasible. For now, protestors and a tree-sitter in the path of Caltrans' proposed superhighway have prevented tree and vegetation removal.

Background

The Caltrans Watch coalition includes: Alameda Creek Alliance, Bay Area Coalition for Headwaters, Campaign for Sensible Transportation, Center for Biological Diversity, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, Environmental Protection Information Center, Friends of Coyote Hills Committee, Friends of Del Norte, Friends of the Eel River, Local Ecology and Agriculture Fremont, Mendocino Group of the Sierra Club, Northcoast Environmental Center, Pacificans for Highway One Alternatives, Piercy Watersheds Association, Redwood Chapter of the Sierra Club, Safe Alternatives for our Forest Environment, Save Little Lake Valley, Save Niles Canyon, Save Our Sunol, Save Richardson Grove Coalition, Tri-City Ecology Center and Willits Environmental Center.

Caltrans has consistently refused to consider less expensive and ecologically damaging alternatives to highway widening projects that could accomplish safety and transportation objectives, and has ignored public concerns, input and opposition. The coalition points to half a dozen highway-widening projects being pursued by Caltrans that are not needed to achieve the stated safety or transportation access purposes:

- * The \$10 million Richardson Grove project to widen and realign Highway 101 through Richardson Grove State Park in Humboldt County, damaging prized old-growth redwoods to supposedly increase access for large commercial trucks;
- * The \$210 million Highway 101 superhighway the size of Interstate 5 around Willits, not needed for local traffic volumes, requiring the largest wetlands fill permit in Northern California in the past 50 years and running through headwaters of salmon-bearing streams and habitat for endangered plants;
- * The \$19 million Highway 197/199 widening projects in Del Norte County along the "wild and scenic" Smith River to accommodate oversized commercial trucks, with impacts to old-growth redwood trees;
- * The \$76 million Niles Canyon highway-widening project in Alameda County, a "safety" project stopped by a citizen lawsuit. Caltrans now admits the widening is not needed and the Federal Highway Administration recently concluded it is not warranted by the state's safety data. It would have cut 600 riparian trees and added four miles of cement retaining walls and rip-rap along a regionally significant stream for steelhead trout;
- * The \$50 million Calera Parkway project to double the width of Highway 1 in Pacifica, in San Mateo County, with impacts to endangered frogs and garter snakes.

The coalition supports safe roadways and sensible transportation planning. For each of these projects the organizations have expended considerable effort through the available public review processes to encourage Caltrans to pursue reasonable and effective safety or access upgrades that would avoid needless environmental

destruction. These efforts have largely been frustrated by Caltrans' refusal to even evaluate viable alternatives proposed by the affected communities.

The pattern of flawed decision-making and inadequate environmental review by Caltrans has forced community organizations to resort to litigation as the only remaining avenue to seek redress. The coalition cites systemic problems within Caltrans, beginning with the manner in which transportation infrastructure needs are identified, the proposed solutions to address those needs, incomplete and inadequate review of environmental impacts, and disregard for concerns of local communities.

For more information on the Willits Bypass project (Mendocino County):

[Environmental Protection Information Center](#) web page

[Save Little Lake Valley](#)

For more information on the Richardson Grove project (Humboldt County):

[Save Richardson Grove](#)

[Center for Biological Diversity](#) web page

[Environmental Protection Information Center](#) web page

For more information on the Smith River project (Del Norte County):

[Environmental Protection Information Center](#) web page

For more information on the Niles Canyon project (Alameda County):

[Alameda Creek Alliance](#) web page

[Save Niles Canyon](#)

For more information on the Calera Parkway project (San Mateo County):

[Pacificans for Highway 1 Alternatives](#)