

## Save Niles Canyon from Caltrans



Caltrans has begun a damaging and unnecessary project to widen Highway 84 through Niles Canyon, along an important steelhead trout stream in Alameda County, under the guise of safety. This controversial project will actually make the canyon more dangerous for drivers and cyclists, waste \$76 million in public funds, degrade important trout habitat and jeopardize a decade of restoration efforts in Alameda Creek, and blight a designated scenic highway and the natural beauty of Niles Canyon.

Caltrans has proposed highway widening along much of the winding and narrow Niles Canyon Road between Fremont and Interstate 680. Fitting the standard 12-foot lanes, 2-foot median, and 8-foot shoulders in the narrow canyon would require cutting 600 trees along the Alameda Creek riparian corridor, extensive filling of the creek and floodplain, and constructing cement retaining walls and rip-rap in the active channel to accommodate unnecessarily wide roadway shoulders. This would damage habitat for steelhead trout, Alameda whipsnake and red-legged frog and remove rare sycamore forest. There are simple alternatives Caltrans has not evaluated such as flashing or signal lights, radar speed signs, median barriers, additional rumble strips, focusing on localized problem areas, or other measures within the existing roadway.

Caltrans began construction and cut nearly 100 native trees in the canyon in spring 2011, but the environmentally damaging project was stopped by a lawsuit by the Alameda Creek Alliance challenging the inadequate environmental review. The Alliance won a court order halting construction in June 2011 and a settlement agreement from Caltrans in December 2011 requiring them to abandon the project. Phase two would require cutting nearly 500 more trees in the middle of the canyon and adding almost two miles of retaining walls and armoring along the creek, which would damage irreplaceable trout habitat.

Caltrans internally “approved” phase one in 2006 without alerting the public that the project had been finalized. Caltrans filed a “Negative Declaration,” claiming no significant environmental impacts, rather than the required Environmental Impact Report for a project with significant impacts. An Alameda Superior Court judge [excoriated](#) the agency’s clandestine project approval and obstruction of the public process. Caltrans’ conduct in this project has bordered on fraudulent and criminal: the agency refused to conduct a transparent and thorough environmental review, hid the project approval from the public, falsified and manipulated safety data to justify the project, and lied about the project contract at public hearings.

The City of Fremont, which opposes the proposed highway widening, conducted its own traffic safety study and reached significantly different conclusions than Caltrans regarding rates of collisions and fatalities in the canyon. Fremont sent a letter to the Governor requesting he intervene to stop the project, citing “extreme” and “shocking” environmental impacts and “blatant disregard for getting input from the public.” Fremont’s data shows that collision and fatality rates are lower than the statewide average and that after Caltrans installed a center-line rumble strip in 2007, collisions in the canyon dropped by nearly 50 percent.

Traffic experts contend that Caltrans’ project approach may actually make the canyon more dangerous for drivers and cyclists by increasing vehicle speeds. Highway safety can be addressed in the canyon without road widening and adverse environmental impacts. There are potential adverse economic impacts from highway widening to the Niles and Sunol communities, which rely on Niles Canyon’s historic past and scenic value to underpin local jobs and businesses.

The Federal Highway Administration conducted a Road Safety Assessment for Highway 84 in Niles Canyon, and found that Caltrans’ proposed highway widening project is not warranted by the state’s safety data. The FHA proposed several dozen immediate measures within the existing roadway that can be quickly and inexpensively implemented to reduce vehicle collisions, and site-specific projects for five priority locations in Niles Canyon to reduce accidents.

Public protests, the lawsuit and the FHA study have forced Caltrans to reassess the project. Caltrans representatives finally publicly acknowledged that the rationale for the projects and safety data was flawed, that Niles Canyon road is safer in many regards than the state average, and that the safety rumble strip dramatically reduced accidents and fatalities. Caltrans has promised a “clean slate” on the safety projects and claims it will consider all FHA recommendations. Caltrans will meet with stakeholders and the public before proposing new revised projects. After that they will begin a new environmental review process.

Alameda Creek is an ‘anchor watershed’ considered regionally significant for restoration of threatened steelhead trout to the entire Bay Area. The Alameda Creek Alliance, Save Niles Canyon, Save Our Sunol, Friends of Coyote Hills, Southern Alameda County and Tri-Valley Sierra Club, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society and Tri-City Ecology Center are opposing the project and working to ensure the revised projects do not involve filling Alameda Creek or cutting any more trees.

### **[Alameda Creek Alliance](#)**

### **[Save Niles Canyon](#)**

July 31, 2012 press release: **[Federal Highway Agency Rejects Caltrans Highway Widening Approach for Niles Canyon](#)**

January 23, 2012 press release: **[Caltrans to Start Over On Environmental Review for Controversial Niles Road Widening Projects](#)**