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Federal Court Allows Destructive Willits Bypass Project to Move Forward

SAN FRANCISCO— A federal judge ruled today that the California Department of Transportation’s environmental review and permits for the Willits Bypass were adequate and the agency can continue construction of a four-lane freeway around the community of Willits in Mendocino County. The disappointing ruling comes despite the fact that construction has destroyed and damaged sensitive wetlands, the headwaters of salmon-bearing streams, oak woodlands and endangered species habitats.

Earlier this year Caltrans began cutting mature oak forests and clearing riparian vegetation along critical salmon streams in Little Lake Valley, and began extensive draining and filling of wetlands, despite violations and improper issuance of federal and county quarry and fill permits.

“It’s disappointing that the court accepted Caltrans’ inadequate review and flawed rationale for the purpose and need of this project,” said Aruna Prabhala, staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. “We disagree with the determination that the environmental impacts of the Willits Bypass project are not significant - Little Lake Valley is being devastated by the construction. Unfortunately this is just one of the irrational and expensive highway projects Caltrans is pushing throughout the state that will cause extensive environmental damage without solving traffic or safety concerns.”

“This is a painful lesson in how Caltrans operates with impunity to justify building unnecessary and oversized projects,” said Ellen Drell of the Willits Environmental Center. “Caltrans made false claims to permitting agencies and the courts saying that only a four-lane freeway bypass, with two enormous interchanges, would solve the traffic congestion in Willits, when smaller alternatives would have done the job.”

“The irregularities of the review and permitting process for this massive project have undermined the legitimacy of the Willits Bypass project,” said Gary Graham Hughes of EPIC. “It is a disappointment that the court did not hold Caltrans accountable for playing fast and loose with the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Water Act, two of our nation’s bedrock environmental laws.”

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Conservation groups sued Caltrans and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in May 2012 for violations of the National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Act in approving the bypass project. Caltrans refused to consider two-lane alternatives and new information about lower traffic volumes, and failed to conduct adequate environmental review for substantial design changes resulting in more severe environmental impacts. Local residents have protested the destruction, occupied the construction site, chained themselves to equipment and sat in trees to stop the project.

Background

Caltrans and the Federal Highway Administration are pursuing a bypass on Highway 101 around Willits, supposedly to ease traffic congestion. The agencies insist on a four-lane freeway and have refused to consider or analyze equally effective two-lane alternatives or in-town solutions. The project will construct a six-mile, four-lane bypass including several bridges over creeks and roads, a mile-long viaduct spanning the floodplain, and two interchanges.

Although Caltrans documents show that traffic projected to use the bypass is not enough to warrant a four-lane freeway, the agency unilaterally discarded all non-freeway or two-lane alternatives. New information shows that Highway 101 traffic volumes through Willits are below what Caltrans projected when it determined a four-lane freeway was needed. Caltrans has used unrealistic traffic and growth projections in several projects around the state to justify large highway widening projects.

Bypass construction will harm wildlife habitat and biological resources in Little Lake Valley, including more than 80 acres of wetlands and more than 400 acres of farmland, and requires the largest wetlands fill permit in Northern California in the past 50 years. It will damage stream and riparian habitat for chinook and coho salmon and steelhead trout in three streams converging into Outlet Creek, harm the rare plant Baker's meadowfoam, and destroy increasingly scarce oak woodlands.

A statewide coalition of conservation organizations is challenging irresponsible and damaging highway-widening projects around the state by Caltrans, and calling attention to the agency's pervasive refusal to consider reasonable alternatives to massive highway projects, shoddy environmental review, lack of transparency, reliance on flawed data and disregard for public input. The [Caltrans Watch](#) coalition aims to put the brakes on Caltrans' wasteful spending, institutionalized disregard of environmental regulations designed to protect natural resources, and pattern of refusal to address local concerns.