



Keeping Northwest California wild since 1977

For Immediate Release, May 15, 2013

Contacts: Gary Hughes, EPIC, (707) 822-7711 and (707) 223-5434
Don Gillespie, Friends of Del Norte, (707) 954-1634
Jeff Miller, Center for Biological Diversity, (415) 669-7357

Suit Filed Against Destructive Caltrans Highway-widening Project in Remote Del Norte County

Caltrans Oblivious to Public-safety Concerns, Rare Ecological Values Along Scenic Smith River Canyon

CRESCENT CITY, *Calif.*— Conservation groups filed a lawsuit today challenging a California Department of Transportation highway-widening project that threatens ancient redwoods, endangered salmon runs and public safety along the wild and scenic Smith River Canyon in remote Del Norte County. Caltrans approved a project to widen existing narrow sections of highways 197 and 199 to provide access for oversized trucks, without adequate environmental review of the impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act.

“For more than five years our organization has been identifying water quality and safety issues with this ill conceived project,” said Don Gillespie of the local conservation organization Friends of Del Norte, “but our comments have fallen on deaf ears. It is really a sign of Caltrans intransigence that public interest organizations have to resort to the courts to protect motorist safety and our treasured Smith River.”

Friends of Del Norte, Center for Biological Diversity, and the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) filed suit in state court challenging the \$26 million “197/199 Safe STAA Access Project.” The project would increase unsafe heavy and oversized truck use on narrow roadways along the designated “wild and scenic” Smith River Canyon, increasing the likelihood of deadly accidents and toxic spills, especially in dangerous winter conditions. The project would harm old-growth trees and habitat for protected salmon runs and hurt tourism and local residents.

“The North Coast has been under assault by massive Caltrans projects that the agency refuses to examine for their cumulative impacts on local communities and sensitive environments,” said Gary Graham Hughes, executive director of EPIC. “For Caltrans to barge ahead with this huge project on the precious Smith River after the explosion of controversy around the Willits Bypass project in Mendocino County shows that the agency is completely oblivious to concerns of North Coast residents.”

Environmental Protection Information Center

145 G Street, Suite A, Arcata, California 95521

Tel: (707) 822-7711

Fax: (707) 822-7712

www.wildcalifornia.org

“Another bad idea by Caltrans, trying to jam an unnecessarily wide highway into a narrow canyon despite the impacts,” said Jeff Miller with the Center for Biological Diversity. “Public distrust of Caltrans is at an all-time high with revelations of Caltrans quality-control issues on the new Bay Bridge, conflict over the massive Willits Bypass project, the need for court and federal intervention to resolve Caltrans problems with the Niles Canyon project, and the agency’s proposal to needlessly vandalize the ancient redwoods of Richardson Grove State Park.”

Caltrans seeks to widen highways 197 and 199 at seven different locations, including major realignment and reconstruction of a bridge at one of the most sensitive sites along the pristine Smith River. Under the California Environmental Quality Act, all the environmental impacts of a project must be publicly disclosed and evaluated, reasonable alternatives with less damaging impacts must be considered, and mitigation measures must be developed to minimize environmental harm.

Caltrans has failed to take into account threats to salmon habitat and water quality along the Smith River, as well as increased safety hazards, and avoided looking at the cumulative impacts of numerous associated Caltrans highway-widening projects in Northern California for oversized truck access. Caltrans refused to consider alternatives besides highway widening, adopted unsubstantiated findings about impacts and mitigation measures, and failed to develop a monitoring program to ensure mitigation measures are actually followed.

Background

Route 199 is a scenic byway along the Smith River canyon, through the Six Rivers National Forest and the Smith River National Recreation Area. It provides access to Redwood National and State Parks, one of only two UNESCO World Heritage sites in California. Route 197 is a country road that parallels the lower Smith River, the only undammed river in California, with the longest stretch of designated “wild and scenic” river in the lower 48.

The project was first announced to the public in 2008. Conservation groups have been fighting misguided Caltrans attempts to widen Highway 101 through ancient redwoods in Richardson Grove State Park for oversized trucks. A lawsuit challenging that project resulted in a federal court sending Caltrans back to the drawing board for basing its project design on “faulty data.” Despite efforts by Caltrans to keep the Smith River project out of public scrutiny, hundreds of letters outlining concerns about impacts of the project on rare ecological resources and highway safety have been submitted.

A Caltrans internal report prepared in 1989 acknowledged the physical constraints of the narrow, steep and rocky Smith River Canyon and concluded that environmental concerns make Highway 199 “a poor candidate for extensive upgrading.” There will be significant threats to motorist and bicyclist safety if oversized trucks are routed to these roadways during winter, when Interstate 5 can be closed by snow and ice. These roadways already have a history of truck accidents. Caltrans is not even proposing operational modifications at the sites of two major recent truck accidents on Highway 199, revealing the inadequacy of the project for addressing motorist safety concerns.