



Keeping Northwest California wild since 1977

For Immediate Release, September 24, 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, (510) 499-9185

Lawsuit Filed to Protect Wild and Scenic Smith River From Destructive Caltrans Highway-widening Project

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

CRESCENT CITY, *Calif.*— Conservation groups filed a federal lawsuit yesterday challenging a California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) highway-widening project that threatens endangered salmon runs, ancient redwoods and public safety along the wild and scenic Smith River Canyon in California's remote Del Norte County. Caltrans approved a project to widen narrow sections of highways 197 and 199 to provide access for oversized trucks without adequate review of the impacts. The groups had filed suit in state court in May for inadequate environmental review under state laws.

"Caltrans would have us believe allowing oversize trucks to drive faster through the tight Smith River canyon will make this scenic highway safer, yet it will do the opposite," said Don Gillespie with Friends of Del Norte. "We are challenging this project to protect motorist safety and defend our treasured Smith River."

Friends of Del Norte, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) are challenging the \$26 million "197/199 Safe STAA Access Project." It 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 during dangerous winter conditions. The project would harm old-growth trees and habitat for protected salmon runs, as well as harm tourism and local residents.

"The Smith River is one of California's natural wonders and the last major undammed river in California," said Gary Graham Hughes, executive director of EPIC. "At a time when our river systems are under incredible stress, the Smith River is an oasis for humans and fish alike. The river corridor and coho spawning grounds deserve full protection from unnecessary and destructive highway development."

"Caltrans is trying to sacrifice the pristine and ecologically important Smith River for its ill-advised network of routes for oversized trucks through coastal Northwestern California," said Jeff Miller with the Center for Biological Diversity. "This type of major roadwork is inappropriate along these narrow, rural roads and critical salmon habitat."

Environmental Protection Information Center

145 G Street, Suite A, Arcata, California 95521

Tel: (707) 822-7711

Fax: (707) 822-7712

www.wildcalifornia.org

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires public evaluation and disclosure of environmental impacts, consideration of reasonable alternatives with less damaging impacts, and development of mitigation measures to minimize environmental harm. Caltrans' approval of the project violates several federal laws, including NEPA, the Magnuson-Stevens Act protecting "essential fish habitat," the Wild and Scenic River Act and the Department of Transportation Act. The lawsuit also charges the National Marine Fisheries Service with failing to determine whether the project will jeopardize protected coho salmon and green sturgeon, in violation of the Endangered Species Act.

Caltrans failed to properly evaluate threats to salmon habitat and water quality along the Smith River and safety hazards from increased truck traffic. Caltrans refused to consider alternatives besides highway widening and adopted unsubstantiated findings about impacts and mitigation measures. The agency avoided looking at the cumulative impacts of numerous associated Caltrans highway-widening projects in Northern California for oversized truck access.

Background

Highway 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, and the Smith River — the only undammed river in California, with the longest stretch of designated "wild and scenic" river in the lower 48. A 1989 Caltrans report 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."

Highway 197 is a 5-mile long, two-lane country road that runs north to south along the lower Smith River, and just east of Crescent City. It is a rural-residential route with 72 driveways directly entering onto the road. In order to avoid Jedediah Smith State Park at the western edge of the project, oversized trucks would divert off Highway 199 and travel along Highway 197 to the north of Crescent City to reach Highway 101.

This project would facilitate a growth in truck traffic that will degrade the safety and quality of life of residents. Routing oversized trucks to these roadways during winter, when Interstate 5 can be closed by snow and ice, will pose significant threats to motorist and bicyclist safety. Caltrans is ignoring its own safety guidelines for the project and did not adequately assess these impacts in the environmental documentation.

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. On the North Coast of California EPIC works to [Rein in Caltrans](#), and supports the statewide [Caltrans Watch](#) coalition, which 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.

The plaintiffs are represented by attorneys Stuart Gross and Sharon Duggan, and the nationally recognized firm of Cotchett, Pitre & McCarthy.