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Caltrans Still Obsessed with Road-Building

The state agency is plowing forward with road-widening plans that could harm California's majestic redwoods.

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During the past two years, a firestorm of criticism has enveloped Caltrans for its shoddy work on the new Bay Bridge. Just last week, the California Highway Patrol announced that it had launched an official investigation, following revelations by a state Senate panel that Caltrans retaliated against whistleblowers who had raised serious concerns about the \$6.3 billion eastern span. But while the news media and politicians have focused on Caltrans's scandals in the Bay Area, many environmentalists have grown increasingly alarmed about the agency's actions a few hundred miles away, along the state's pristine North Coast.

Caltrans has embarked on a series of road-building and highway-widening projects that likely will cost a total of about half a billion dollars to complete. And environmentalists say the projects not only will harm old-growth redwood forests and threaten wild and scenic rivers, but also will spur more suburban sprawl and increase greenhouse gas emissions.

Environmental groups contend that Caltrans' obsession with road-building, especially in forested areas, runs counter to California's climate-change goals and to state policies designed to increase urban density and discourage suburban and rural growth. An independent state panel that conducted a comprehensive review of Caltrans came to the same conclusion earlier this year. "It's completely antiquated," said Peter Galvin of the Center for Biological Diversity in an interview, referring to the agency's ongoing road-building plans in rural Northern California. "These projects are crazy."

Late last month, the Center for Biological Diversity joined other environmental groups and local residents in filing a new federal lawsuit to halt one of the projects — a highway-widening proposal that would slice through an ancient stand of old-growth redwoods in Richardson Grove State Park. Set along the Eel River, the park is a popular camping, hiking, and swimming destination. The project calls for cutting into and paving over the roots of many of the grove's ancient redwoods. Some trees in the park are more than 3,000 years old and up to 300 feet tall.

Environmental groups have actually been fighting the project since 2010, when they filed lawsuits in both state and federal court to stop it. Then in 2012, a federal court sided with the groups and ordered Caltrans to redo its environmental assessment of the project, concluding that the agency had relied on "faulty data" when it had said that widening state Highway 101 would not harm the redwoods. Earlier this year, a state appellate court made essentially the same finding.

Yet despite the legal setbacks, Caltrans has plowed ahead with its plan.

Earlier this year, the agency approved a revised environmental assessment of the project in response to the 2012 federal court ruling. The environmental groups' newest lawsuit challenges this assessment, contending that the agency failed to fix its faulty data.

"They basically did a rubber-stamp analysis — that the widening project won't harm the roots of the redwoods," Galvin said. "If they had to go through the Sistine Chapel, they wouldn't blink, and in this case, they are going through the Sistine Chapel — it's called Richardson Grove State Park."

Environmental groups have repeatedly argued that Caltrans also has failed to evaluate the impact of all the road-building projects on the North Coast. As the *Express* has previously reported, another Caltrans project, near Crescent City, would cut through an old-growth redwood forest along the majestic Smith River — the last undammed major river in California (see "A Wild River in Peril?" 5/22/2013). Environmental groups have sued to stop that project. They've also successfully halted the Willits Bypass, a Caltrans' project on Highway 101 in an area that is known as the gateway to the great redwoods.

Caltrans has repeatedly refused to discuss the ongoing litigation. But the agency has maintained that the projects will improve highway safety, especially for truckers.

Opponents of the projects, however, say that Caltrans has failed to make its case, and that the highways are safe now. And they contend that the true goal of the projects, when taken together, is to open up the North Coast to more growth. All of the widening projects are designed to make it easier for big-rig trucks to traverse the area — and thus to supply big-box and other chain retail stores in the region.

The road-widening proposals also could provide big rigs with an alternative north-to-south route to Interstate 5, and thus make it easier for them to move goods from Southern Oregon through the North Coast to the Bay Area and Southern California. Currently, the redwood groves and narrow winding roads serve as a barrier to more large trucks in the North Coast. "The Richardson Grove and the [Smith River] projects are totally unnecessary — unless Caltrans is trying to create a corridor, an alternative to I-5," said Natalynne DeLapp of the environmental group EPIC (Environmental Protection Information Center).

The new highway corridor also could prompt more people and businesses to move into a region that is now largely unspoiled. As such, the road-building projects are in conflict with recent state laws that are designed to curb sprawl and protect green spaces. And it's precisely these kinds of highway projects that prompted a state panel, known as the State Smart Transportation Initiative, to sharply criticize Caltrans in January for failing to adapt to 21st-century needs. "Caltrans today is significantly out of step with best practice in the transportation field and with the state of California's policy expectations," the panel stated. "It's in need of modernization."

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