New Study: Caltrans Construction Project Destructive to Iconic Redwoods

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Eureka, Calif. — The Richardson Grove Project, a proposal by Caltrans to realign Highway 101 through the old-growth redwoods of Richardson Grove State Park, hit another bump in the road as new research confirms what environmental advocates have long argued: cutting and paving over redwood roots is likely to cause significant impairment to the remaining forest. The research was attached to comments submitted by the Humboldt-based Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) and Californians for Alternatives to Toxics (CATs) as well as the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and Natural Resources Defense Council as part of public comments on the project, the latest in a long struggle to hold the agency accountable to environmental laws. The project has been controversial since its inception in 2007 because it proposes to remove trees from the state park and would cut into the roots of more than 100 old-growth redwood trees in the project area.

“These majestic ancient trees belong to all Californians and are already under pressure from drought and wildfire driven by global climate change,” said Tom Wheeler, Executive Director of EPIC. “Caltrans’s proposal to cut and pave over the roots of these thousand-plus year-old trees is unconscionable, particularly when Caltrans has repeatedly refused to admit the consequences of their actions.”

The peer-reviewed research examined the impact of highway construction to redwood forests in Humboldt Redwoods State Park, in conditions similar to the proposed Richardson Grove project, found changes in growth rates as determined by tree ring width and stable carbon isotopes. Researchers confirmed that highway construction significantly impaired redwoods near the road, with marked reduction in growth and dieback of the canopy of individual trees. Researchers believe that road construction affected the root system of these trees, similar to the kind of impacts associated with the proposed Richardson Grove project. Importantly, researchers also found that trees were significantly affected from road construction more than 30 meters (94 feet) from the roadway, a distance nearly double the area Caltrans has analyzed for impacts to redwoods in the state park.

“This project is a CEQA mess because Caltrans has chosen to churn out one analytical document after another in a layered effect with substantial and frequently undefined changes in each document making it difficult to impossible to keep track of what is its current form,” said Patty
Clary, Executive Director of CATs. “State agencies are required to make decisions subject to public scrutiny and CEQA standards but Caltrans’ shifting analysis and the shaky ground it's built on are particularly worrisome when it involves plans to dig around the roots of towering trees that have stood for thousands of years.”

EPIC, CATs and CBD are participants in a plaintiff group that has litigated for more than a decade in state and federal court to force Caltrans to provide an analysis of environmental impacts that conforms with requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). California courts have firmly established that to proceed with actions posing potential environmental effects, an agency must take an honest and thorough accounting of the likely impacts of the proposed project and support its conclusions with substantial evidence, with the underlying intent to protect not only the environment but also informed self-government.

“The research clearly demonstrates the Richardson Grove Project will devastate old-growth redwoods that are emblematic of California’s natural heritage,” said Damon Nagami, Senior Attorney and Director of NRDC’s Southern California Ecosystems Project. “Caltrans has spent more than a decade trying to approve this project without properly vetting the environmental implications. It’s time to pull the plug on this and look at safer project alternatives to ensure every generation has an opportunity to walk among these redwood giants.”

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