



Large trucks have been maneuvering safely through the redwoods of Richardson Grove for many years. (Photo by Amber Jamieson) Amber Jamieson

[CALIFORNIA FORUM](#)

Caltrans should slow down and enjoy the old-growth redwoods. Instead, it has taken on an icon on the 101.

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Coast redwoods, the official state tree of California, are facing a threat from an odd source: engineers.

After a century of precipitous decline that has slashed more than half the original acreage of these old-growth forests, the state transportation department is proposing “minor adjustments” to Highway 101 through Richardson Grove State Park. The project, designed to accommodate big-rig trucks with trailers hauling cargo up and down California’s primary coastal artery, will cut into and pave over redwood tree roots, damaging as many as 100 trees as old as 2,000 years.

Caltrans engineers say widening the highway and elongating the curves through the 1.1-mile length of Richardson Grove is “critical to the commerce” of the region. For the already endangered species, it is unnecessarily life-threatening.

Richardson Grove is the most prominent stand of the world’s tallest trees that travelers encounter driving north from San Francisco. The highway narrows from four lanes to two as it enters the iconic world of redwoods. Sunlight filters down from crowns 300 feet above the ground through multiple canopies of deep green foliage on 18-foot diameter trunks. The combined majesty of ancient, huge and hushed begs reflection – a deliberate deceleration, a pause for deep and slower breathing.

Instead Caltrans wants to speed up traffic through the grove. The construction would allow large trucks with sleeper cabs, currently prohibited, to drive through the Richardson redwoods without fear of side-swiping one another as they pass in opposite lanes. The project would “change the geometry” of north-south travel on Highway 101, said Eli Rohl, a Caltrans spokesman.

The current restrictions on this small stretch of highway have irritated state engineers for more than a decade. They have pursued construction with dogged determination, citing as benefits both public safety and economic advantages for Eureka and surrounding communities.

Equally determined opponents have sued. The lawsuit eight environmental organizations and individuals [filed in June](#) is the fourth since 2012. Courts have consistently sided with the plaintiffs, calling the agency's data "faulty" and citing errors in its mapping and measurement of affected old-growth redwoods.

Caltrans keeps coming back. The latest plan, [released without fanfare in May](#), is a cosmetically altered version of the original.

The Richardson Grove project is an example of institutional thinking that can't see the forest for the trees. Caltrans says it will spark the local economy, but critics who have successfully challenged the agency's data call it a boon to big-box stores at the expense of local jobs.

Caltrans also claims road widening will improve public safety by smoothing the flow of traffic through an annoying choke point. But straightening out the windy roadway will increase the speed of traffic, and higher speeds almost always produce more accidents, said Fraser Shilling, co-director of the Road Ecology Center at UC Davis.

There's another irony for the state that touts itself as the planet's leader in confronting climate change: As road construction makes highways easier to travel, more people use them, increasing carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions. This small stretch of roadway reflects a disconcerting disconnect between California's well-publicized goals for reducing carbon emissions and its agencies' on-the-ground activities.

Instead of bigger, wider, straighter and faster, Caltrans engineers should be searching the right sides of their brains for more creative solutions. A fresh evaluation might inspire alternatives that would not damage redwoods: reducing the speed through the grove; allowing big-rigs through during restricted hours; one-way traffic controlled by a signal-light system. To its credit, Caltrans has considered many of these out-of-the box suggestions. None, however, have made it onto the drawing board.

Caltrans' linear methodology is a death-by-a-thousand-cuts strategy dealt to a species that has already suffered a million blows. What if agency engineers just drove to Richardson Grove, got out of their vehicles and breathed deeply? With enough fresh air, they may find there isn't a problem after all.

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