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‘We are standing with the trees’: EPIC, tribes call on Caltrans to halt Richardson Grove project



A truck drives along a windy stretch of U.S. Highway 101 through Richardson Grove State Park in Southern Humboldt. For more than a decade, local tribes and environmental groups have called upon Caltrans to halt the project. The Environmental Protection and Information Center and the Intertribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council recently wrote a letter demanding the project be stopped. (Will Houston — Times-Standard file)

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The Environmental Protection and Information Center and the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council are once again calling upon Caltrans to halt its [Richardson Grove Improvement project](#) along U.S. Highway 101 in Southern Humboldt County. Both groups sent a joint letter of opposition to local and state Caltrans officials earlier this month.

“The controversial project has been delayed for over a decade due to public concerns that it would harm old-growth redwood trees in Richardson Grove State Park,” the letter stated. “... In addition to the very concerning environmental and public trust consequences of this project, Caltrans has failed to adequately consider the impacts of this project to Indigenous peoples and culture.”

Though EPIC and the Sinkyone Council have long opposed the highway widening project, EPIC spokesperson Matt Simmons said both groups felt the Indigenous perspective had been absent from previous efforts to defend Richardson Grove.

“The letter was co-written by Hawk Rosales of the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council which represents 10 tribes whose ancestral territories span much of Northern California,” Simmons told the Times-Standard. “Some of the members of those tribes trace their ancestry to the Sinkyone People whose ancestral territory includes Richardson Grove. The letter documents why old-growth redwood trees (Gááhs-tcho in the Sinkyone language) are a special relative whom Indigenous peoples were taught to never harm.”

Sinkyone Council executive director Hawk Rosales said the project would cause “irreparable harm to the cultural relationship with the redwood forest.”

“Like the redwood trees that have existed despite every effort to eradicate them, tribes have somehow survived all of these assaults. We are standing with the trees,” Rosales told the Times-Standard. “The project is an unnecessary, ill-advised project that really should never have been proposed in the first place. It is more important to save those trees because they represent only 2% of the ancient redwood old growth that still stands in this region.”

Caltrans maintains that no old-growth redwood trees will be removed as a part of the highway widening project.

“The proposed U.S. 101 improvements through Richardson Grove aim to make minor alterations to select curves that will allow for standard-sized truck access along a 1.1-mile stretch of the highway,” according to a statement from Caltrans District 1 provided by Myles Cochrane. “The federal court of appeals recently affirmed there will be no significant impact to the health or stability of old-growth redwoods in Richardson Grove.”



Cochrane noted construction crews will “exercise extra caution to further minimize impacts by using hand tools when feasible.”

Simmons argued that Caltrans has “routinely ignored” concerns surrounding the project raised by EPIC.

“The agency’s strategy appears to continue to push forward without any meaningful stakeholder engagement or attempts to bring the public into the decision-making process — perhaps with the hope that eventually they will plow their way through community opposition and legal challenges,” Simmons said. “It hasn’t worked for a decade; there is no reason to think that it will work for the next decade. Instead, EPIC has repeatedly asked for the current project to be shelved and if Caltrans moves forward with a new project, that this be pursued through a more transparent and public process. ”

Rosales said additional tribal involvement could halt the project.

“Now is a time for the tribes to really step forward and assert their inherent rights to protect this place,” he said. “Both the Biden administration and the Newsom administration have (increased) awareness of tribal rights and sovereignty and the role of tribes to protect nature ... which are important for tribal leadership in conservation efforts.”

More information on the Richardson Grove Improvement project can be found at dot.ca.gov.

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