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Suit says Highway 101 plan threatens redwoods

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A coalition of environmental groups and individuals filed a lawsuit this week in San Francisco challenging a plan by the California Department of Transportation to widen a highway through an ancient redwood grove.

The widening of Highway 101 through Richardson Grove State Park in Humboldt County would pave over and sever the roots of 87 old-growth redwood trees, according to the suit filed Thursday in San Francisco Superior Court.

"We've got arborists and foresters who will say the paving over and cutting of the roots will put the ancient redwoods at risk," said Peter Galvin, the conservation director for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the plaintiffs in the case. "This is a very delicate ecosystem. Though the ancient redwoods won't be cut down, they will be killed as a result of this project."

Caltrans intends to widen and realign a 1.1-mile stretch of highway through the 2,000-acre park, which is south of Benbow and north of the Mendocino County line. The park is considered the entrance to the world's last remaining old-growth forests, known as the Redwood Curtain.

Named after California's 25th governor, William (Friend) Richardson, the grove is in the same region as the Avenue of the Giants. One of the plaintiffs is Trisha Lotus, the great-granddaughter of Henry Devoy, who transferred the property to California in 1922 so it could become a state park.

"My family going back five generations wanted this land protected. We were hoping the state would protect it," Lotus said. "Caltrans is trying to minimize what they are doing, but this is a serious thing."

The highway through Richardson Grove would remain one lane in each direction under the plan. The idea is to straighten the road out and widen the shoulders in an effort to accommodate the largest big rig trucks, which currently do not use the roadway.

Many business leaders and politicians in Eureka have expressed support for the project on grounds that it would help commerce.

Mark DeSio, the Caltrans spokesman, said the project is in full compliance with state and federal environmental laws. He promised that no ancient redwoods would be killed.

"The public can be assured that no old-growth redwoods will be harmed," DeSio said. "We are using innovative construction methods and minimum work to solve a long-standing transportation problem on the North Coast."

The plaintiffs, however, characterized the issue as "trucks versus trees," arguing that Caltrans is providing cover for wealthy business interests who want to build big-box stores in Eureka.

"Caltrans cannot guarantee that their project will not damage the old-growth trees, some of which are 2,000 years old," said Kerul Dyer, the outreach director for the Environmental Protection Information Center, which is also a plaintiff. "We don't have even 4 percent of the original number of old-growth trees left. We don't have enough of them to play around with."

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