

The Southern Coastal Highway Project



...and the fate of the last remaining coastal temperate rainforest in South America

This government infrastructure project represents the single greatest **threat** to Chile's Temperate Rainforests.

The coastal highway and ensuing developments will mean the:

- Accelerated deforestation of the coastal rainforests
- Destruction and further isolation of many endemic species, genera and forest types in this globally recognized bioregion
- Threat to the cultural survival and persistence of the indigenous Huilliche-Mapuche communities
- Contravention of Chile's environmental and indigenous laws, as the construction is proceeding without environmental review
- Denial of citizen participation, consultation or debate
- Provision of enormously costly infrastructure to a timber industry oriented toward woodchip exports and conversion of old growth native forests to eucalyptus plantations.

We urge the government of Chile to cease construction of the coastal highway until the following measures are taken:

- a) A study of alternative routes for the road, mitigation measures, and a monitoring plan to reduce the negative and irreversible impacts on the ecosystems and primary forests in the medium and long term
- b) A land use plan for the coastal region, considering the economic and social impacts of the road, in particular the consequences of tourism development and timber industry activities in an area that lacks sufficient protected areas
- c) A comprehensive environmental impact assessment for the entirety of the proposed route (319km), as the government has so far refused to submit an environmental impact assessment for more than 6km.
- d) A precise delimitation of the areas of direct and indirect impacts on the indigenous communities and the natural heritage of the country, considering short, medium and long term impacts
- e) Creation of new protected areas to secure a representative portion of the coastal range: a highly threatened, biologically diverse and unique bioregion
- f) Consultation, through participatory processes, of stakeholders regarding any major project that may impact on the integrity of the coastal range. Stakeholders include, the indigenous authorities, the scientific community, and those under the umbrella of the Coastal Range Coalition

Project Characteristics

The Southern Coastal Highway is being planned and built by Chile's Ministry of Public Works along the 319 km coastline of the Lake's (X) Region. The Highway, planned to stretch from the cities of Valdivia to Puerto Montt, would cut through the country's last intact coastal temperate rainforest, jeopardizing many endemic species that have already been extirpated from the majority of their historic ranges.



Coastal highway under construction Photo Coalición Conservación.

Stated objectives of the Ministry of Public Works:

- 1) Integrate so-called "internal frontiers" - geographically isolated areas. (This concept was created by General Pinochet)
- 2) Develop an alternative north-south national transportation route
- 3) Develop new areas of tourist interest
- 4) To incorporate ecologically important areas, facilitate their control, preservation, and public access
- 5) Provide social benefits for coastal communities.

These objectives conflict with the lack of consideration to land planning and the extreme fragility of the coastal ecosystems and its indigenous population. In addition, no employment has been generated because the construction is being carried out by the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Chilean Coastal Range – Temperate Rainforests are a Globally Significant Ecosystem

Both in scale and diversity of species and ecosystems, Chilean native forests are globally irreplaceable. The forests represent one third of the remaining primary temperate rainforests in the world and, due to their isolation, have evolved as a biological island. The considerable endemism and singularity of the Valdivian temperate rainforest ecoregion, and of the coastal range in particular, has led many international scientific and conservation organizations, including the World Wildlife Fund, World Resources Institute, Birdlife International, Natural Resources Defense Council and Conservation International, to classify this area as a global biodiversity priority in need of urgent protection.

The Coastal highway would impact the habitat of many unique and endangered species, such as the southern river otter, the Magellanic woodpecker, the world's smallest deer (the pudú), arboreal marsupials, the voqui pilfuco vine, and the unique Coastal Olivillo Forests (*Aextoxicon punctatum*). In less than 200 years, this forest type has been dramatically reduced from its original northern distribution limit (30°) to its current northern limit, near Valdivia (39°).

In this region of Chile, the majority of biodiversity is concentrated in the coastal range. It is estimated that there are 400 species of plants in the coastal range, compared with only 250 species thought to occur in the Andes range. Of the protected areas designated in this region, only 2% are located in the coastal range, with the remainder in the Andes. The diversity of plants and associated organisms occurs at lower and medium elevation areas. The areas protected in the coastal range are located at high elevations (> 600m), outside the zone of major biodiversity.



Coastal Olivillo Forest. Photo : Photo Coalición Conservación.

The Coastal rainforests are threatened by unregulated logging and conversion to plantations

The highway's major impact would be to open the area to logging and forest conversion. North of the Lakes (X) Region, nearly all coastal forests have been eliminated or reduced to degraded fragments. The process of forest conversion to plantations will be channeled along the new route. Currently in the Lakes District, less than 20% of native forest logging occurs within legal management plans, and of this only a tiny percentage can be considered sustainable. The situation of highgrading and further clearcutting and conversion into plantations is unlikely to be any different in the coastal range. It is broadly recognized among Chilean political leaders, academics and environmental organizations that enforcement of forest legislation in Chile is extremely weak and that almost no cases end in an actual sanction against the offenders.

The Coastal Highway is an access road designed for the timber industry

Approximately 500 000 acres of the Coastal Range remains virtually roadless and biologically intact. This status is due largely to its historic isolation and the difficulty of access. The Coastal Highway would alter this, and function as a penetration route built to a high standard for the timber industry. It would serve companies focused on the exploitation of native forests for woodchips and conversion to plantations. The northern terminus of the highway is a commercial port whose facilities are primarily used for the export of woodchips and fishmeal. The project would thus provide industries supplying this port with extensive new forestlands. Over the short to medium term, the highway would also serve to feed a major pulp mill to be built near the city of Valdivia.



Pudu, the smallest deer in the world. Photo Courtesy of Steve Morello.

Perspectives of Civil Society

Chilean scientists, environmental and regional organizations regarding the project's potential impacts, have expressed deep concern. The need for alternatives to be discussed has been highlighted. This need is particularly pertinent, as the project has begun to severely impact an area that is one of the country's most urgent priorities for biodiversity conservation. It is listed in CONAF's (National Parks and Forest Service) "Red Book" of priority sites and is also included in two designated Tourism Protection Areas.

Concerns of the scientific community

The Ecological Society of Chile has clearly expressed in a public letter in June of 2001 that:

"The Coastal Range Forests within this latitudinal range are a remarkable reservoir of the world's biological diversity and the major concentration of endemism within the South American temperate forest region. This is due to the area's particular biogeographic history, that can be traced to the pre glacial periods and favorable climatic conditions provided by the proximity of the Pacific Ocean.

The current degradation of the coastal forests, indicates that over the medium-term we will have to regret the lose of an important portion of the region's biodiversity."



Coastal landscape near Valdivia Photo Coalición Conservación.

Concerns of Mapuche-Huilliche Communities

The project would directly impact the ancestral territory and communities of the Mapuche-Huilliche indigenous people, cutting across at least ten coastal communities. In a declaration on February 14, 2001, these communities unequivocally expressed their opposition to the project due to the expected negative impact on their territories and culture. Their traditional and representative body, the *Junta de Caciques de la Butahuillimapu* has also declared its opposition to the highway on many occasions. In direct violation of Chile's indigenous law (LEY 19.253), neither the communities, nor their organizations were consulted before work on the road began, nor have they been consulted since.



Caleta Cóndor. Photo DT Coalición Conservación.

Declaration by 9 Huilliche Coastal Communities (February 13, 2001)

In their declaration the Huilliche communities have clearly expressed opposition to the coastal

highway. They see that it is a project that does not fulfill their real needs and have expressed concerns about the consequences of its construction:

"The timber companies will come to massively exploit our native forests and convert them to timber plantations of pine and eucalyptus, these exotic species destroy our environment and are incompatible with our way of life. The tourism companies will take our most beautiful places."

Anselmo Paillamanque is a Mapuche-Huilliche traditional chief (Cacique) of the *Junta General de Caciques de la Butahuillimapu*. In referring to the project he said:

"This is a form of eviction, and means the death of the Huilliche People and our culture, disappearance of the forests, of all the things that we come from, and the fauna is going to be lost. We take care of our forests, because they are part of our life. We are part of our soil, we belong here, We appreciate all of this, a clean environment, unpolluted air, clean water, if our forest disappears due to the exotic plantations, everything will disappear."

The Coastal Coalition

Environmental, regional, indigenous and scientific institutions organized in the Coastal Coalition (CCCC) have sought to engage the Ministry of Public Works (MOP) in a constructive dialogue and have studied and proposed an alternative in-land route for the highway that would reduce costs, increase social benefits and greatly reduce environmental impacts. In May 2001, the National Director of Transportation and the Minister of Public Works publicly stated that a route change of this nature was under consideration. In late May, they discarded the proposal.

As there is a serious need for a study of alternative routes, a comprehensive EIA, and a review of the standards and status of the project, the CCCC has arranged for an independent cost-benefit analysis of both the current project and the proposed alternative route. Preliminary results show that the MOP's proposed route is uneconomical as well as impractical from an engineering perspective, whereas the alternative route would be considerably less expensive and lower risk.

Environmental review

Approximately 30 km of the 319 km highway is already under construction. An environmental impact assessment has been completed for only 6 km. Earlier commitments by the government of Chile to submit the entire project for environmental review have not been kept. The government is now proposing to conduct an environmental assessment for only one other small segment of the project.

Negotiations and government commitments

Pablo Anguita, the ex-National Director of Transportation, has stated that, "the original project would have severely affected South America's major reservoir of primary forests". Pointing to the unexpected difficulties of the project, he noted that, "the area was at risk, since the road was very complicated, and involved many large excavations, causing rock slides along the road" (El Metropolitano 8/04/01).

A study contracted by his department also recognized that, "the project will cause the loss of environments as well as flora and fauna with special conservation status".

Carlos Cruz, Chilean Public Works Minister, recently interviewed by CNN En Español, has stated:

"I think that an important part of the country's environmental capital is provided precisely by the zone of forests south of Valdivia, where there are ancient alerces and olivillos costeros, and forests of other species, all of which are very valuable for the conservation of our flora and fauna".

Ivan Navarro, the regional Governor, when explaining the rationale for the potential changes in the official route, stated that, "the route's earlier design involved crossing areas which are extremely difficult geographically, which considerably increase the costs of the project" (El Diario Austral, Osorno 26/03/2001).

Shortly, after these statements appeared in the national press, the dialogue with the Coastal Coalition was abruptly terminated by the government. The Director of Transportation was forced to resign and construction was renewed on the original project. Press reports pointed to political pressures as the cause of this back flip, and the Ministry has offered no technical explanations.

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