

Safety is an easy thing to sell. That's why so many transportation projects are sold to the public as safety improvements, even when the real purpose has nothing to do with safety. Take the Richardson Grove and 197/199 highway projects in our region. Both of these projects are explicitly designed to allow bigger trucks easier access into, out of and through our region. But Caltrans has always said that both of them will also do a lot to improve safety on our roads. And a lot of people support these projects, not because they care about big trucks, but because they care about safety. Like I said, safety is an easy sell.

That's why a new report from our local Coalition for Responsible Transportation Priorities – CRTP - is so important. Their report – which you can read at their website, transportationpriorities.org – looks at all the state highways in Caltrans District 1 – which covers Humboldt, Del Norte, Lake, and Mendocino Counties. They broke the whole system down into 5-mile segments and recorded all of the fatal accidents over a recent 4-year period.

What they found was that on average, each 5-mile highway segment on the North Coast had 1 fatal accident over the 4 years – but 14 segments had 4, 5 or even 6 fatal accidents. “The highest number of fatal accidents on any stretch of highway was on the 101 going through the town of Weott but there were also very high rates on 101 in Arcata and Fortuna. The group rightly pointed out that if you want to have the biggest impact on safety, these locations would be a good place to start. But inexplicably, there have been almost no Caltrans safety projects affecting these areas!

The report also calls out Caltrans safety claims about the Richardson Grove and 199 projects. It argues that since big trucks

are more dangerous than smaller vehicles when it comes to accidents, these projects to allow more big trucks can hardly be considered safety projects. It also points out that the design of both projects include major exemptions from Caltrans own safety standards for shoulder width, curve radius, sight distance, and other road measurements. That's not very reassuring. I must say these CRTP folks really did their homework.

Safety may be an easy sell, but it's a serious subject. Let's not take it lightly, or use it to justify just any old project – let alone a project that will actually decrease safety. I encourage Caltrans to take the Coalition's challenge – drop the big truck projects and put that money toward real safety projects instead.