

'Drive right,' Highway 17 trucks urged

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SANTA CRUZ — A voluntary plan to restrict slow-moving trucks to the right-hand lane of the mountainous portion of Highway 17 in peak commute hours will begin in two weeks.

The so-called Truckers Right Plan is being pushed by the Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission and the Highway 17 Advisory Committee. The latter is made up primarily of 20 commuters and trucking company representatives who drive the winding, four-lane highway between Scotts Valley and Los Gatos regularly.

The voluntary plan was initiated by truckers, said Transportation Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen. It is seen as an alternative to a blanket truck ban that was discussed by transportation commissioners

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earlier in the year.

The truck problem on Highway 17 has long been a subject of heated debate. It's a common sight on weekday mornings to see long lines of commuters backed up in the fast lane after one trucker decides to pass an even slower-moving big rig.

The voluntary right-lane-only truck lane is proposed to operate between 6:30 and 8:30 a.m. weekdays — when northbound traffic is heaviest.

According to a California Trucking Association newsletter, "It is hoped that the exclusive use

of the right lane by slower-moving vehicles will allow a smoother flow of traffic in the left lane, and reduce the number of hazardous maneuvers made by impatient drivers following trucks."

Mike Ray, a plant engineer for Granite Construction's Santa Cruz office, called the voluntary plan "a good start.

"It's a step toward creating a solution," he said. "Instead of people talking, this is people doing. Truckers are aware of the situation. They want to see a solution just as much as commuters do.

Wilshusen is confident truckers will voluntarily adhere to the right-hand lane, reiterating that truckers came up with the plan. "We'll just have to try it and see," she added.

Others, however, aren't so sure about the plan.

"I really have my doubts about it," said Bob Barber, general manager of Hildebrand and Son's Trucking in Watsonville. "There's so many independent truckers, I don't think you'll be able to get them together. Most of them would rather get over 17 the best way they can."

In conjunction with the voluntary lane restriction, the committee will be passing out bumper stickers and brochures, and promoting "cooperation, courtesy and caution" for all Highway 17 motorists through signs and billboards. The kick-off of the campaign is set for July 24.