

# Russian River plan to mine gravel, restore habitat

Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle, 12-2-10

A controversial plan to resume gravel mining, a practice that has been blamed for wiping out tens of thousands of salmon in the Russian River over the past century, is scheduled for approval next week along an important stretch of the river.

Sonoma County supervisors will vote Tuesday on a permit that would allow Syar Industries Inc. to combine in-stream gravel mining with habitat restoration for 6.5 miles through the picturesque Alexander Valley.

The plan is to mine up to 350,000 tons of gravel annually out of the riverbed near Geyserville over the next 15 years and, while the workers are at it, shore up eroding banks that are eating away land from the adjacent vineyards.

The work, conducted between June and November, would also create oxbows and pools for migrating fish, open up three creeks blocked by gravel bars, remove invasive grasses, and plant willows and cottonwoods.

The supervisors have already expressed support for the permit, which conservationists blasted as an ill-conceived effort to cash in on the one thing that endangered steelhead trout, and coho and chinook salmon need most to procreate and survive.

"There is absolutely no benefit whatsoever to the fish from removing gravel from the river," said Don McEnhill, the executive director of Russian Riverkeeper, a nonprofit conservation organization. "They want to bring the river back to the way it was in 1994 after 40 or 50 years of unregulated mining."

McEnhill and other environmentalists claim more gravel than can be replenished by natural processes will be taken out of the river. He said wineries and tourism will be harmed by a perpetual convoy of 480 gravel trucks running every summer day between Geyserville and the Syar processing plant in Healdsburg.

## Environmental report OKd

The county has given the green light to the proposal's environmental report, and many grape growers in the Alexander Valley support the plan.

"Syar has come in with a unique plan that combines in-stream mining with enhancements to restore riparian vegetation, create flood plains and backwater habitat for the fish," said Jennifer Barrett, the deputy director of planning for Sonoma County. "All together there are 26 acres proposed for riparian restoration over the 15-year life of the permit. That is the most substantial riparian restoration proposal that we have seen on the Russian River."

The exploitation of the Russian River is a sore subject in Sonoma County, which was a mecca for gravel mining throughout much of the past century.

The river historically meandered over the entire valley, distributing vast quantities of hard gravel over the centuries. The gravel began as rocks and boulders that had washed into the river from nearby mountains and cliffs during storms and was smoothed out by the water as it slowly rolled downstream.

Aggregate companies began pit mining in the river around the 1940s, when a freight train ran along the river carrying the gravel used in the concrete that built the cities of the West Coast.

Aggregate from the Russian River fueled the expansion of Santa Rosa. BART's transbay tube and the buildings along San Francisco's Embarcadero have Russian River gravel in them. In some years during the mining peak in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, a million tons of gravel was taken out of the river, mining company officials said.

Between 1980 and 1995, 42 million tons of gravel came out of the Russian River, according to county figures.

As a result, the river bed dropped as much as 6 feet in places, according to the environmental report. The steep banks sped the flow of water and separated the river from both tributaries and the vast Alexander Valley flood plain, which historically provided food and rearing habitat for fish, an extremely important aspect of survival.

### **Degraded habitat**

The entire river suffered from the loss of riparian forests and a lack of large woody debris, and the banks began eroding at an alarming rate. The river was twice as wide in the 1940s as it was in 1995, experts said.

Predictably, the vast schools of squirming fish that once migrated up the river and its tributaries began to suffer.

As many as 80,000 coho salmon thrashed their way from the ocean up the Russian River until the early 1900s. Coho are now functionally extinct in the Russian River basin. There were 100 coho in the late 1990s. By 2001, fewer than 10 fish returned to spawn in the watershed.

Steelhead proved a heartier species, but only about 5,000 a year now spawn in Russian River tributaries compared with between 50,000 and 60,000 in 1965, biologists said. About 3,500 chinook spawn in the river each year.

It is not an isolated problem - coho now make up only about 1 percent of their historic population in Central California - and experts acknowledge there are many other problems, including logging, overgrazing and the degradation of ocean habitat, that have affected fish.

### **Government standards**

John Perry, the vice president of the engineering department for Syar, said the company is following guidelines established by the National Marine Fisheries Service. The permit, he said, would not allow mining below the summer water line that was established in 1994, when the county adopted its aggregate resource management plan.

"All we do is skim off the excess gravel above the water level in the summer," Perry said.

McEnhill said that, by his calculations, is too much, especially given the dire circumstances of the fish population.

"We were prepared to accept an appropriate level of mining, but this project looks to us like it will be four times what the river can provide, what is called a safe yield," McEnhill said. "If they approve this, it is very likely that we will be going to court to overturn it."