

Mine expansion proposed north of Big Bear, where endangered plants grow

David Danelski, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 5-23-10

A Swiss company wants to more than double the size of a pit mine north of Big Bear, destroying terrain that is home to an endangered plant found only in that part of the San Bernardino Mountains.

Officials with Omya California Inc. say they would make up for habitat losses by giving up mining rights on a much larger patch of land suitable for the plant.

The Cushenbury oxytheca and Omya both thrive on the unique minerals found just below the surface of a ridge top at 7,900 feet elevation on the northern edge of the mountain range.

The inconspicuous annual grows in spring and has thread-like stems and tiny pink flowers. It is one of four rare plants that live only in a swath of calcium carbonate-rich earth among the ridges between Lucerne Valley and San Geronio Peak.

"Over the eons, these plants developed a tolerance to carbonate soils, making it their niche," said Ilene Anderson, a botanist with the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group.

Calcium carbonate minerals are used to make cement, plastics, latex and many other products.

The Omya mine expansion is an example of how wildlife officials work to protect plants and animals teetering on the edge of extinction while still allowing development. Habitat can be disturbed as long as enough land is protected elsewhere to allow for the species to survive.

A similar strategy is being used in the Mojave Desert, where solar and wind energy companies want to build on land occupied by desert tortoises, which are threatened with extinction.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the "carbonate plants" as endangered or threatened with extinction in 1994 after four decades of strip mining for limestone and other calcium carbonate-based minerals by several companies cut into the plants' already limited range.

Limestone, now mined by Mitsubishi Cement Corp., is used in making cement. The purer calcium carbonate is mined by Omya and Specialty Mineral Inc. When ground to a powder, it is a key "extender" or filler used in plastic and latex products. An even purer material, mined by Omya at a quarry near Amboy, is used to make antacids and the filler in prescription tablets and capsules.

All of it originated from shellfish and calcium deposits left on an ancient ocean floor at a time when the West Coast was as far east as Utah, explained Omya geologist Howard Brown. The ore the company mines now was pushed upward and purified by geological forces that turned a seafloor into what's now the San Bernardino Mountains.

To keep its mountain mine productive for another 25 years, Omya wants to add 29 acres to its 21-acre Butterfield 3 quarry. Omya expects to blast and dig out 320,000 tons of ore and waste rock from the quarry each year, according to the U.S. Forest Service, which manages the public land where the mine operates.

Endangered plants are not the only issue. Scenic views also are a potential concern. To remedy the white, carbonate walls of a large pit that would be visible from Big Bear ski resorts, the company plans to apply a brown varnish, Brown said.

DAMAGE COMPENSATION

The pit is an eight-mile drive up the mountainside from the company's processing plant in Lucerne Valley. On a day in mid-May, Brown pointed out the melting remains of snowdrifts, then picked up a golf ball-size snow-white chunk of ore. A cool breeze tugged at his long white beard.

"In this you can see the crystals," Brown said. "This is high-grade ore. It can be ground up to make PVC or paint."

Digging and processing ore from this and two other nearby quarries now employs 58 people.

Brown acknowledged that habitat for Cushenbury oxytheca would be blasted away but added that he expects little controversy.

Few plants live there now because of a recent forest fire, he said. And plans to compensate for the mine expansion already are addressed in the 2003 Carbonate Habitat Management Strategy, a 95-page planning document used by the Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management to allow mine expansions while also protecting the plants.

For every acre to be claimed by mine expansions, mining rights must be forfeited on three acres elsewhere, the plan says. According to the plan, more than 20,000 acres should be protected for the four rare plants.

The company would use waste rock to fill in mined-out portions of the open pit. Once the areas are filled, the plants would be reintroduced, Brown said.

SUCCESS REPLANTING

The company has been successful in replanting endangered Cushenbury buckwheat, one of the carbonate plants, in a reclamation area west of the Butterfield quarry. A hillside planting several years ago of 100 plants just above an ore haul road has grown to 500.

Although a full-scale environmental review is not required, the Forest Service is taking public comments through June 3 about what should be included in a more limited environmental assessment of the mine expansion.

Omya is operating the mine under the authority of a claim made in the 1950s, Brown said. Calcium carbonate is a type of mineral, like gold and silver ore, that can be mined from public land without paying royalties to the government.

Anderson helped develop the carbonate habitat management plan when she worked for the California Native Plant Society, but now works for the activist Center for Biological Diversity. She said the group will review the mine expansion plans and submit official comments.

"We are concerned whenever habitat is lost for an endangered species," she said.