

Russian River gravel mining approved

Sam Scott, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 10-26-10

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors gave its unanimous blessing Tuesday to a mining operation that will extract up to 350,000 tons of gravel a year from a 6.5 mile stretch of the Russian River.

The move delighted supporters who see the project in the Alexander Valley as a boon to jobs and as a way to manage the river's erosive power.

But it infuriated environmentalists who questioned the validity of the science supporting the project as well as the county's rush to approve it six months after the release of a hefty environmental impact report.

"This just being shoved through," said Don McEnhill, executive director for Russian Riverkeeper, a conservation organization.

The group's figures show that the mining, which is called skimming because heavy equipment is used to scrape surface rock from the gravel bars, could take more gravel than the river replenishes, threatening habitat as well worsening erosion, he said.

But the supervisors gave high marks to Napa-based Syar Industries and its plans to extract gravel from 15 bars along the river. The mining would take rock from above the water line.

The supervisors praised Syar for running a gauntlet of local, state and federal regulators and for agreeing to a lengthy list of mitigations including planting 11 acres of vegetation.

"It's a win for the fish, it's a win for the river, and it's a win for agriculture and the economy," said Supervisor Paul Kelley, who led the round of praise for the project.

Under the proposal, which will be voted on formally in December, Syar will be able to mine up to four gravel bars a year from June 1 to Nov. 1 with only one bar to be mined at a time.

Maximum hours of operation will be from 6 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. The permit will run for 15 years, five more than was previously allowed under county regulations, though the county will monitor the operation more closely than previously required.

Tuesday's hearing attracted a standing-room-only crowd, with many participants eager to support a project that promises to create scores of construction jobs.

George Naill, a 64-year-old operating engineer from Cloverdale, said he couldn't afford to retire, yet he couldn't find a job. In the past 18 months, he has probably worked four, he said.

At home he maintains an organic garden and tries to minimize waste, he said. Being green matters to him. He felt Syar's project was good for everyone.

"It's not about creating irresponsible jobs," he said. "It's about jobs that make a lot of sense and are good for everybody."

Others said they were sick of losing prime land to the river, and felt that Syar's extractions would reduce erosion.

Karen Waelde, a Geyserville resident, said the loss of the Geyserville Bridge in 2006 had left her with a 60-mile round trip to downtown Geyserville and had cut off her elderly neighbors from fire services.

"I have seen what the river is capable of doing," she said. "We have finally arrived at an efficient, ecologically sound plan to address this profoundly challenging issue, which will not just go away."

Some voiced concerns about noise and dust, but most concerns from opponents were about environmental damage.

Fred Euphrat, a hydrologist, accused the board of losing sight of the bigger picture, focusing on a small part of a 100-mile long river where what happens upstream effects what happens downstream and vice versa.

"Why is the Board of Supervisors evaluating a small project on a large river without asking what is the best way to manage the river for everyone?" he said.

McEnhill of Russian Riverkeeper said the project threatens to worsen erosion, especially if too much gravel is removed.

You might momentarily force the erosion slightly downstream, he said, but the net effect will be basically unchanged.

"No amount of money is going to keep that river from eroding," he said.

Much of the erosion problems come from development along the river, pinching the banks, he said.

Ultimately, the answer is to give the river room to meander by retreating from its sides, he said.

He said his organization was evaluating its options in wake of Tuesday's meeting.

"I don't see my board of directors just letting this go," he said.