

Syar project gets Supes' straw vote OK

County Board certifies final EIR, mining use permit

George Snyder, Sonoma West Times & News, 10-28-10

Following a lengthy, and jam packed, public hearing Tuesday, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors approved a Final EIR and a Use Permit for Syar Industries to remove up to 350,000 tons of gravel a year for 15 years from the Russian River in the lower Alexander Valley.

After lengthy remarks from each supervisor the board also congratulated county staff, various resource agencies and Syar itself for successful collaboration in the application process that began with scoping sessions in the Geyserville area back in 2006.

More than two dozen people spoke at the hearing, many of them in favor of Syar and the mining proposal.

Then, as now, the project got vigorous support from local residents who blamed built up gravel bars for land loss, erosion and damage to the Jimtown Bridge linking Geyserville to the east side of the river during major flood events.

And, as in recent hearings before the Sonoma County Planning Commission, representatives of construction unions also supported the project, citing the need for jobs in the current depressed economy.

Critics of the plan, including representatives of the Russian Riverkeeper, Sonoma County Conservation Action and Trout Unlimited, either called the EIR "flawed" or incomplete.

Some area homeowners critical of the plan also voiced concerns over potential traffic, air quality and noise impacts expected to emanate from the mining project.

The Board of Supervisors, in conducting the straw vote, decided to give final approval to the project as a consent item at its December 7 meeting.

Fourth District Supervisor Paul Kelley, who made the motion to accept the EIR, Syar use permit and changes to the Aggregate Resources Management Plan — such as giving a 15-year permit instead of the 10-year permit currently in the ARM plan — praised not only the project but the process which included input from several state and federal resource agencies, including the California Department of Fish & Game, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the National Marine Fisheries Service in coming up with mitigation measures for the project.

"This is a win, win, win, win situation," Kelley said, saying it was a win for farmers, a win for fisheries, a win for jobs and a win for the county.

The project, which Syar officials said would commence "sometime after April" assuming the final approval comes in December, calls for an alteration in gravel mining such as using primarily "horseshoe skimming" to protect some channels, riparian restoration including planting some 11 acres of riparian forest in the first six years of mining and connecting several tributaries to the main river to enhance spawning potential.

The project, including the resource mitigation measures, would be under the auspices of an Adaptive Management Strategy that would be reviewed annually by a scientific review consultant from the Sonoma

County Permit and Resource Management Department as well as state and federal resource agencies.

The project will mine about 110 acres of gravel bar, one bar at a time and up to four gravel bars a season, on property owned or leased by Syar along a 6.5-mile long stretch of river between Gill Creek and the Jimtown Bridge.

Among supporters of the project was Al Cadd, president of the Russian River Property Owners Association and rancher Ray Pigoni, both of whom have spoken repeatedly at hearings on the issue.

“This plan has the approval of all the agencies and works under the county’s general plan,” said Cadd. “This is the very first plan for fish habitat I’ve seen in regards to gravel mining in the river.”

Pigoni, meanwhile, in response to criticism of the plan by some speakers, said, “One thing you never hear mentioned is people’s homes flooded. I’m here to say that if Syar does step out of line, we will be here to tell you. Otherwise, Syar are the only ones to help us.”

Critics, in addition to Russian Riverkeeper Program Director Don McEnhill, included former 4th District Supervisorial candidate, Healdsburg forester Fred Euphrat, and a staff attorney for the Oakland-based Earthjustice organization, Gregory Loarie.

Loarie, who said, “I grew up in the Alexander Valley” added that his office considers the EIR “deeply flawed.”

Loarie said the EIR used pre-recession data to calculate demand for river gravel in construction and failed to factor in climate change on the river’s salmonid population in coming up with mitigation for the project.

For his part, McEnhill said that while his group doesn’t oppose all gravel mining in the Russian River the “flawed” document fails to identify all impacts.

“The gravel amounts in the river are based on flawed data,” he said. “A lot of the gravel is not from upriver but actually from the erosion from nearby river banks. They will be selling local landowners gravel.”

“For the first time in history,” he added, “we can support some gravel mining but let’s take the time to take some additional evaluation.”

The board’s action follows a 4-1 approval by the county planning commission in late October.