

Mining plan near Sequoia park divides region

Environmental and cultural interests battle economic needs in Fresno County dispute.

Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times, 9-26-10

REEDLEY -- A Mexican cement company's 100-year plan to blast gravel off a mountain at a scenic gateway to Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks has pitted the environmental and cultural interests of San Joaquin Valley ranchers and Native Americans against the economic needs of the region.

Cemex, one of the world's largest suppliers of building materials, wants to blast and drill 2 million tons of sand and gravel each year on the southern face of Jesse Morrow Mountain, a western Sierra Nevada peak towering over California 180, about 20 miles southeast of Fresno.

Cemex spokeswoman Jennifer Borgen said the mine would supply the region for decades to come, create 40 new jobs and add about \$48 million annually to Fresno County's economy.

"It will also actually reduce air pollution and greenhouse emissions," she said, "because the conveyor belts will be covered and the material will be close to customers. As a result, it will cut back on fuel emissions and reduce truck miles."

Opponents, however, fear it could become a major source of hazardous particulates and ozone in a region ranked as one of the smoggiest in the United States.

The proposal has already caused a rift within the Choinumni Tribe, one faction of which has received money and land from Cemex.

Starting in 2012, mine workers would blast down the mountain in a series of mile-long "benches," removing granite to be crushed for building material. After a bench is mined out, the one above it would be restored with topsoil and natural vegetation. Initially, the ridgeline of the mined portion of the mountain would be lowered 400 feet.

The proposal calls for 954 truck trips a day along the two-lane country highway that streaks past fruit orchards, a winery, cattle ranches and panoramic vistas of oak forests and meadows strewn with the remnants of ancient Native American villages.

Now, with the Fresno County Planning Commission preparing to vote on the project's environmental impact report, opponents organized under the banner Friends of Jesse Morrow Mountain are stepping up their campaign to prevent the mine from being built.

"When I first heard about this proposal, my heart fell into my shoes," said Jim Van Haun, who, with his wife, built the 20-acre Cedar View Winery and adjacent Sequoia View Bed & Breakfast in the shadow of Jesse Morrow Mountain in 1998. "It will destroy a priceless view shed and unique ambience."

Local cattle rancher Donna Hacker agreed. Standing on a massive boulder pocked with ancient grinding potholes just a stone's throw from the mountain, Hacker shook her head and said, "It's hard to imagine that Fresno County would even consider allowing a big, noisy, ugly mine in a place like this."

Richard Young, a retired NASA planetary scientist who lives in the area, questioned the county's assumption of a need for that much sand and gravel, given that U.S. Census Bureau information shows a slowing in growth since 1990. Young's own analysis indicates that gravel production by existing mines would meet the county's needs through 2030, providing plenty of time for officials to find alternative, less polluting sources of building material.

Fresno County Supervisor Debbie Poochigian, whose district includes Jesse Morrow Mountain, declined to comment on the project. "I want to keep my mind as open about this as I can before forming an opinion," said Poochigian, who received a campaign donation of \$1,000 from Cemex in 2008.

Critics are also concerned about Cemex's regulatory difficulties elsewhere. In Colorado, a state enforcement action against Cemex in 2006 resulted in a \$1.5-million settlement. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2007 filed a lawsuit alleging the company's Victorville operation had been modified without proper permits and pollution control equipment. In that case, Cemex agreed to reduce emissions and pay a \$2-million fine.

In a controversial move here, the company donated \$10,000 and an offer to lease 40 acres on the north side of the mountain to the Kings River Choinumni Farm Tribe, which supports the mine, the company said. The faction's leaders could not be reached for comment.

But David Alvarez, chairman of the Traditional Choinumni Tribe, referred to that deal as "yet another heartbreaking example of corporate divide-and-conquer strategies in Indian Country."

Allowing Cemex to mine Jesse Morrow Mountain, he said, "would be an assault on our traditions and culture and put a cloud on the hopes and dreams of our elders."

Borgen pointed out, however, that the mine site had been surveyed by a team of anthropologists and archeologists who "found nothing at all of historic or cultural significance."

Some tribal members said she missed the point. Jesse Morrow Mountain anchors a swath of key ancestral lands that extends a few miles west to the Kings River, south to the site of a bloody massacre of tribal members in 1852, east to ancient campgrounds and north to the only patch of land still owned by the tribe of roughly 500 members: a two-acre parcel known as Choinumni Sacred Burial Grounds.

The grounds, which are off-limits to nonmembers of the tribe, are at the end of a dusty road just south of the Pine Flat Dam on the Kings River. Surrounded by chain-link fence, they contain dozens of gravesites marked by crosses made of scrap wood. Veterans' gravesites are decorated with small American flags and framed by large river rocks painted red, white and blue.

"My mother, Angie 'Yo-Wis-Nuth' Osborne, longtime leader of the Traditional Tribe, was buried there last November," said Audrey Osborne, that faction's historian. "She spent the last years of her life fighting for the preservation of Jesse Morrow Mountain."

"She told us, 'That site is sacred. It is not for sale. Do not give up this fight!'" Osborne recalled. "We promised to complete her work."