

Supervisors OK west county rock quarry

Walt Cook, Sonora Union Democrat, 4-6-11

The controversial Cooperstown Quarry won unanimous approval from the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors Tuesday.

Already, one lawyer for project opponents has vowed to sue the county.

At the Stanislaus-Tuolumne County line, the 135-acre quarry is projected to produce 56 million tons of rock over its 45- to 75-year lifespan.

The project's many detractors — including those who own land near the proposed mine site and Stanislaus County officials — wanted an environmental impact report to be prepared before a decision was made.

EIRs are required by the California Environmental Quality Act for projects that have significant environmental impacts that cannot be mitigated.

Supervisors declined to require an such a report Tuesday, saying the environmental work that developers — Jamestown landowners Jack and Tricia Gardella and Resource Exploration and Drilling — have already done suffices. Dozens of conditions attached to project permits, they contend, will reduce impacts to an acceptable level.

Andrew Grundman, an attorney for clients he has yet to name, said he plans to file a lawsuit against the county within a month. He claims the county violated the California Environmental Quality Act by not requiring an EIR.

Several officials from Oakdale, Riverbank and Stanislaus counties were among the anti-mine contingent who requested an EIR.

A formal working group — made up of the developers and various officials — will continue discussing project concerns. These include whether Sierra Railroad trains hauling rock from the quarry will impede traffic at crossings and impacts on a largely unpaved road near the mine site.

The Cooperstown Quarry — an open-pit mine that will be reclaimed in phases — will sit nine miles from Knights Ferry.

Supervisor Randy Hanvelt, the board's most outspoken project advocate, condemned the EIR process entirely just before the vote was taken Tuesday.

Hanvelt said if an EIR were required for the transcontinental railroad, the Apollo moon landings and the Wright Brothers' first airplane flight, those history-making events never would have occurred.

"The EIR is a weapon," Hanvelt said, noting that the lengthy process costs developers time and money. "It's a weapon because I don't like the mine in my backyard."

EIR supporters countered that such a report would ensure that the project's impact would be mitigated to the best extent possible.

Project description

Up to 56 million tons of rock are slated to be removed from the mine over its projected 45- to 75-year lifespan, according to project plans. About 45 people will be employed at the mine, which would operate around the clock.

Up to 33 times a year, explosives would be used to loosen the rock and make it easier to extract.

Front-end loaders would then scoop up rock and put it in crushers, and Sierra Railroad trains would haul it off.

More than 500,000 cubic yards of topsoil, which would be stripped from the site to reveal the rock, will be used to reclaim — or restore — the mine site. A reclamation plan must ultimately be approved by the state.

In addition, more than 900 oak trees would be removed over the course of the work.

The rock extracted from the mine would be used for a variety of industrial uses, including road base, which county road officials say is hard to come by.

In approving the project, supervisors rejected a number of additional conditions that the county Planning Commission had recommended, including measures to mitigate noise by limiting hours of operation.

“Forty-five jobs for three generations — that’s a lot of families who will be able to make a good living,” said Supervisor Evan Royce, just before the vote was taken.

After the meeting, Planning Commissioner Jerry Morrow, who had hoped for an EIR, called the supervisors’ decision “disappointing.”

“Everybody worked hard, but what are you going to do?” he said.

Tuesday’s meeting was an extension of a public hearing on the project last month. Supervisors voted to postpone their decision at that time due to the voluminous paperwork associated with the project.