

Plan to mine gravel in Russian River draws fire

Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle, 1-7-11

A lawsuit was filed Thursday challenging a plan to resume gravel mining in the Russian River through the picturesque Alexander Valley, the first project of its kind in a decade.

The conservationist groups Russian Riverkeeper and the Redwood Empire chapter of Trout Unlimited sued the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors over the board's approval of a plan to combine in-stream gravel mining with habitat restoration along 6.5 miles of the river near Geyserville.

"This approval fast-tracks the mining of gravel at a rate beyond what nature can replenish," said Don McEnhill, executive director of Russian Riverkeeper.

The proposal by Syar Industries Inc. was approved by the supervisors Dec. 7. It calls for the restoration of native grasses along 26 acres of the river and the annual removal of 350,000 tons of gravel for 15 years. Workers would shore up eroding banks next to vineyards.

The removal of millions of tons of gravel from the Russian River over the past century has been blamed for ruining water quality and helping wipe out tens of thousands of fish. As many as 80,000 coho salmon once spawned in the Russian River, but the species is now functionally extinct in the watershed.

"Our kids and grandkids should be able to have the experience of finding, and maybe even catching, native California trout, salmon and steelhead in their historic range," said Julie Carlson, president of the local chapter of Trout Unlimited. "That is our vision."