

County begins review of quarry expansion

Mark Noack, Half Moon Bay Review, 6-16-11

San Mateo County officials are completing a public review period for a proposed expansion to Pilarcitos Quarry that would more than double the mining area currently being tapped at the site off Highway 92.

The San Mateo County Planning Commission introduced a draft environmental impact report last week that detailed the proposed 117-acre expansion at the quarry. The company says the expansion would provide enough granite to last for 100 years.

Run on leased land by West Coast Aggregates, the Pilarcitos site is the largest granite quarry on the Peninsula, churning out about 600,000 tons of aggregate annually. But after more than 40 years of extracting rock from the hill ridges, quarry managers say they only have enough usable granite to supply another three years of mining.

To meet federal mining laws, the Pilarcitos Quarry project report is including a reclamation plan for returning the land back to nature after the minerals are extracted.

"You can't take everything out and walk away and leave a huge scar. That's what happened in the Gold Rush era, and it's taken some 150 years for the landscape to recover," explained Michael Schaller, county planner for the project.

The environmental impact report noted the expansion project could cause erosion and send more sediment down Pilarcitos Creek, a water source for Half Moon Bay. To remedy this problem, the West Coast officials are pledging to use fencing and slopes to prevent runoff from entering the creeks. The company is also expected to monitor the site and provide regular reports on sediment, water quality and runoff to state and county agencies.

The project report also notes the expansion could harm a variety of threatened plants and wildlife species, including the red-legged frog and marbled murrelet. The company is setting aside 210 acres nearby the mining site as conservation land. In that area, the company says it would build three ponds specifically for frog breeding and would monitor the number of endangered species in the area.

Traffic along Highway 92 could also increase due to the quarry expansion, the report noted. The county recommended posting signs on the highway and installing new turnoff lanes.

Pilarcitos Quarry is one of the only aggregate sources in operation in the Bay Area, providing materials for concrete, asphalt and sand for construction projects. Schaller said that if the county denied the quarry permit, it would likely force buyers to ship those materials at a markup from distant sources with a higher carbon footprint.

The public review period for the environmental impact report is expected to end on June 24. County planners expect a final report on the mining expansion to be complete by September.