

Seabiscuit's home becomes focus of Willits-area quarry debate

Glenda Anderson, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 4-3-12

An author whose book revived the memory of Seabiscuit, a scrappy Depression-era racehorse that inspired a nation, has weighed in against a proposed asphalt plant near the historic Willits-area ranch where the horse retired and is buried.

“I am distressed to think of this historic and pristine rangeland being forever marred by a pollution-belching eyesore,” Laura Hillenbrand wrote in a letter to the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors. “Please vote no on this project and preserve this historic treasure.”

The board on Monday is scheduled to decide whether to amend a county zoning ordinance that would allow Northern Aggregates Inc. to add an asphalt processing plant to its rock quarry.

The Harris quarry is located on rangeland that runs along Highway 101 between Ukiah and Willits. It overlooks Seabiscuit's former home on the Ridgewood Ranch, which became a tourist draw in the wake of Hillenbrand's book and a subsequent movie. The ranch also is home to the Church of the Golden Rule, a mobile home park and a charter school.

Supervisors on Monday also are scheduled to adopt the final environmental impact report for the project, which includes expanding the 11.5-acre quarry to about 30.6 acres. Northern Aggregates plans to extract and process 200,000 yards of rock per year for 30 years from the site, produce up to 150,000 tons of asphalt a year and operate up to 100 nights a year, according to the report.

If the zoning change and impact report are approved, the project will next go to the Ukiah Planning Commission for permits.

The Planning Commission has recommended that supervisors approve the zoning ordinance amendment, which potentially could allow asphalt plants to be added to other quarries located on rangeland. The proposal's supporters include the Mendocino County Farm Bureau and the county transportation department.

The project would make asphalt more readily available in Mendocino County, reducing truck traffic through the county and wear and tear on roads, said the plant's project manager, Pat Allen.

“It reduces overall greenhouse gases,” he said.

Critics, including a group calling itself “Keep the Code,” say it will create traffic hazards, visual blight and air, noise and water pollution.