

# Rancher, 94, sues to block quarry project near his property

**Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee, 2-17-13**

Forty years ago, Fraser West pulled onto Dutschke Road outside Ione and drove less than a mile before he found his destiny.

Stretching out below him, West could see the 40-acre ranch he would snap up in 1973, a wide-open swath of grassland and heritage oaks where he has raised generations of longhorn cattle and horses with Teddy, his wife of 68 years, and his son, Bill.

"Boy, when I drove over that hill I said, 'This is it,'" West said on a recent sunny morning.

Today, decades later, he enjoys much the same view. From his front yard, he can gaze upon the snow-draped Sierra Nevada to the east and, to the south, Newman Ridge, the oak-studded hill that rises directly behind his home.

For the retired Marine colonel, who was wounded fighting on Guam during World War II and next month turns 95, the ranch has been a paradise of sorts.

Now, it is his Alamo.

West and his family are engaged in a legal battle with a multibillion-dollar company over plans to build a 278-acre rock quarry 50 feet behind his property line and construct an asphalt plant on 113 acres down the road from his ranch.

The plans won approval from the Amador County Board of Supervisors on a 4-0 vote in October, and the company pushing the project says it already has spent more than \$1 million in preparations for a quarry and plant envisioned to operate for the next 50 years.

That was before West decided to make a stand.

"I didn't get into this fight to lose," said West, who estimates he has spent \$50,000 in legal fees to tie the project up in a lawsuit. "I'm a goddamn Marine."

The suit, filed in Amador Superior Court in November, is supported by several ranching families in the area. It names as defendants the county and the project developer, Newman Minerals.

It also names investors in the property including Farallon Capital Management, a \$20 billion San Francisco-based hedge fund that until recently was run by Tom Steyer, an environmentalist who has been mentioned as a possible candidate to be the nation's next energy secretary.

The suit was filed by the Ione Valley Land, Air and Water Defense Alliance, a group founded by West's daughter, Sondra West-Moore, who says her father is spending the children's inheritance – with their blessing – to fight the quarry.

"It's the right thing to do," said West-Moore, a Hewlett-Packard senior manager who lives in North Hollywood. "You don't get very many chances in life to step up, and this is one for me."

well as new cancer threats for residents.

"The Newman Ridge provides spectacular 360-degree views of rolling grasslands and the entire Sierra foothills and valleys," the suit contends. "Bald and golden eagles, bobcats, migrating Canada geese by the thousands, deer, great blue herons, wild turkeys, Swainson's and other hawks, rare frogs and tiger salamanders, raccoons and badgers populate this untouched environment."

West-Moore and her family have created a website detailing objections to the quarry and started an online petition that, by last week, had attracted more than 730 signatures from supporters as far away as Florence, Italy, and Ottobrunn, Germany.

### **Quarry backers cite jobs**

Supporters of the quarry plan say there is another side to the story, that mineral extraction long has been the county's economic backbone and that the Newman Ridge project would create jobs.

County Supervisor John Plasse, who voted for the project, is a fourth-generation Amador resident who lives on a ranch his great-great grandfather homesteaded in 1853. He said he believes the county benefits from an operation that converts a natural resource – rock – into a valuable commodity.

"This county was built on gold mining ... ," Plasse said. "That whole area was historically used for mining.

"You're bringing money in and creating wealth, and jobs, as well," he said, adding that he hears predictions of devastation "every time the environmental community chooses to oppose something."

Amador County is hardly a stranger to mining. Quarries pockmark the landscape, and old mining sites are readily visible from Highway 104, the main drag that runs near the West home toward Ione.

Another rock plant already operates less than a mile from West's home, one some locals say they have learned to live with.

"The area historically has been mined since probably the Gold Rush," said Brian Oneto, a Drytown rancher whose family roots date to that era.

Oneto was the only member of the Board of Supervisors who did not vote to approve the project, because he was traveling the day of the vote. He said last week he doesn't know how he would have voted.

"I respect Col. West; he's a good guy," Oneto added. "Sometimes you have those things where there's a conflict between old uses and proposed new uses. It's almost which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

"But I've got a quarry probably a mile, maybe a mile and a half from my house. And, yeah, can I hear the trucks when they come in in the morning? Sure, I can hear them. Is it the end of the world? No."

The proposed quarry site is part of a 16,000-acre swath known as Howard Ranch, named for Charles Howard, owner of famed racehorse Seabiscuit. It was purchased in 2006 by Farallon and developers William Bunce and John Telischak for what the Sacramento Business Journal reported at the time as a \$90 million price tag.

The quarry would mine rock and gravel to be sold to builders throughout the region. It would cut into land now

Project officials are not eager to discuss the lawsuit on the record. Newman Minerals officials declined interview requests, but provided emailed responses to questions from The Bee.

Project manager Thomas Swett wrote that the project would create 175 construction jobs and 60 full-time jobs, and that the planned quarry and asphalt plant would build on the county's historical economic base.

"Amador County, and our property in particular, has a long, robust history of mining from the Gold Rush to the present," Swett wrote.

He rejected opponents' claims that Newman Ridge – the slope behind West's home – would be gutted and disfigured.

"The quarry is expected to develop over a 50-year period and it will be decades before any visible portion of the ridgeline is affected. Therefore, the claim that the ridge is being leveled is terribly exaggerated," Swett wrote.

Swett also said opponents are wrong in claiming that investors such as Farallon Capital used political influence to move the project forward, writing that they "are passive investors in the larger ranch property upon which the quarry site is located."

Until October, Farallon was run by Steyer, who figured prominently in the last election as he pumped \$29 million into Proposition 39. That measure, which passed with 60 percent of the vote, closed a corporate tax loophole that had benefited companies that sell in California but base most of their operations outside the state.

The \$1 billion to be generated by that measure includes \$500 million to be spent on energy efficiency programs, something opponents of the quarry project say they find ironic.

Despite Swett's contention that investors have had no say in the quarry plans, an Amador County judge last week rejected their efforts to have their names removed from the lawsuit.

### **Project's impact debated**

An environmental impact study commissioned by the developers say the project has been carefully planned to meet government guidelines and that the plans "minimize impacts to sensitive natural resources and minimize aesthetic impacts through site design and reclamation."

The Wests and others involved in the lawsuit contend the study is flawed.

The plan is for the quarry operation eventually to mine 5 million tons of rock a year from Newman Ridge, a 450-foot-tall, 2-mile-long rise. The ridge would be leveled, the Wests contend, altering weather patterns as winds it once held back blow toward Ione.

The suit claims up to 200 trucks a day would rumble along area roadways, and that the mining operation would generate ear-splitting noise from blasting and rock-crushing.

"We've got enough noise from this one quarry," West said of the plant near his home.

The opponents have submitted letters from various state agencies, including the California Department of Transportation and state mining officials, questioning some conclusions in the draft environmental impact report and asking for more information from the developers.

contend that perhaps 47 trucks would leave the site daily, only 19 heading through Ione.

"Right now, there are five rock-crushing operations and two blasting programs that are nearly equidistant from Main Street Ione as the proposed quarry," according to a response emailed by Swett. "The current amount of disturbance to the residents of Ione is minimal to unnoticeable and will remain so after our project is constructed."

That sentiment is not unanimous.

Ione resident Dave Corsaletti, 64, was visiting a friend's ranch near the site of the proposed quarry this month. He said noise from the existing plant near West's home often can be heard in town, about two miles away.

"They were banging this morning," Corsaletti said, gazing southward toward Newman Ridge. "I mean, you can hear this plant when they're doing the crushing. It goes on all night."

A new quarry and asphalt plant "will be terrible," Corsaletti added.

For West, it would be unthinkable. After a lifetime of action, including more than two decades in the Marine Corps and years as a rodeo calf roper, West retired from an Elk Grove company that made specialty horse trailers and settled in at the Amador County ranch he loves.

He leaned on a fence rail, looking out over a creek that flows through his property.

"So here we are in this lovely spot," he said. "I love it. I always wanted a little ranch like this when I was a kid.

"And if they get this (project) our land value here is zero. The value of this ground would be zero."