

Sutter Gold Mining responds to noise complaints

Matthew Hedger, Amador Ledger-Dispatch, 1-12-13

A series of underground blasting events in 2012 at Sutter Gold Mining Inc.'s Lincoln Mine — which lies between Sutter Creek and Amador City — is being blamed for a broken window, cracks in another house, and the combined frayed nerves of several Amador City residents who took their complaints to the Amador County Board of Supervisors this week.

Sutter Gold Mining Vice President David Cochrane began what turned into a detailed presentation on his company's blasting operation and the physics it entails by thanking Amador City resident Frances Farmer and others for bringing their concerns to his attention.

"It's one of those things that our monitoring data shows that we're in compliance (with use permit conditions)," said Cochrane, "and without hearing these reports we can't look into the issues, so it's very helpful for us." Cochrane said that construction on both above and underground facilities is progressing since work commenced in earnest at the mine site in summer 2012.

"We're finishing up the buildings," he explained. "We're not in production yet, but we anticipate being in production in the first quarter (2013) and ramping up to full-scale production over the next three quarters."

Cochrane's PowerPoint presentation seemed to be a response to noise and vibration complaints Farmer and other residents say are affecting their quality of life.

"This morning, I'm not here to talk about the project and the progress we're making and the contribution we're making to the community," Cochrane said, "other than the contribution of additional noise."

An exhaustive dissertation on atmospheric and ground conditions, temperature and elevation gradients, the size of blasting charges and much more followed, in Cochrane's effort to educate the public on the highly technical and specialized physics involved with blasting solid rock.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Farmer, several other Amador City residents, and others who live nearby, at odds with living near a newly reopened mine in a historic mining district, stepped to the podium to share their experiences.

Les Brusatori said his newly constructed house had been shaken several times.

"I want to be a good neighbor and the fact is that I really feel the energy coming from the blasts," said Brusatori. "I live a mile away from the facility and I live in a new house that was built about a year-and-a-half ago, and I've got dual pane windows, tempered glass, all that, and there's occasions where you hear blasts and it rattles my windows — significantly."

Brusatori questioned the accuracy of monitoring station data collected just 1,100 feet from the mine, which Cochrane said has not reported a problem — since he was being impacted a mile north of the mine.

"I feel it. I would volunteer my property for a monitoring device if you like," he said.

Amador County Planning Director Susan Grijalva said the existing use permit for the mine operation specified

most vibration from any kind of a blast event,” she said. “As to whether additional stations could be required or authorized, that is something that my understanding would have to be agreed upon by the permittee. They are not exceeding their permit levels under the current use permit conditions.”

Farmer then stepped to the podium and recounted her experience on the night of Dec. 11, 2012.

“About 7 p.m., (I was) doing a quiet activity when there was a huge explosion,” said Farmer. “My entire house shook. My windows rattled, and it took me a few seconds to realize I was not dead and my house was still standing. I was shaking, it scared me so badly.” Farmer said she got on the telephone and called a neighbor to make sure she was okay — she was — before going outside.

“We expected to see a fireball in the sky,” she said. “And nothing, just quiet, dark night.”

Farmer said she didn’t consider it might be caused by the mine until she shared her experience with other neighbors.

“Nobody seemed to think it was anything else but the mine,” she continued, “and we’d been emailing and talking and I’d been asking people, ‘What was that? What blew up?’” Farmer said she eventually learned she could file a report, and added that there have been other incidents she now feels could have been reported.

She also told supervisors her house on Amador Creek has sustained significant damage, including large cracks, which she blamed on the mining activity.

Former Amador City Mayor Susan Bragstad, long an opponent of the effort to reopen and work the mine, told supervisors she had been chronicling the blast events and reporting them, but said she was weary of the process.

“You get tired, after so many blasts, of calling Susan (Grijalva),” she said. “So, maybe more of us can start calling her and telling her about the blasts we hear. I’m hoping it all recedes after the new portals are blasted.”

Bragstad said she had discussed additional noise mitigation measures outlined in the use permit conditions with Grijalva, one of which could entail building a barrier of sorts to deflect noise emanating from the mine opening across the valley from her house.

“It’s aimed right at Amador City, right at my house,” she said. “One of the mitigations is to put up barriers and I remember talking about straw bales and other methods and I don’t think they’re doing that, and it’s something I think they could do to redirect the blasts.”

Sutter Creek Council Member Linda Rianda told supervisors she had not heard of any complaints in her city similar to those made in Amador City, but did report hearing a “lot of questions.”

Several other Amador City residents also shared their concerns before Cochrane stepped back to the podium where he appeared to agree to place additional monitoring devices on properties where noise and vibration concerns had been raised.

“I appreciate the feedback and the opportunity to use some of your property,” he said. “Because if we can’t go measure things, where people are experiencing these effects, we can’t tell you with certainty how they comply, or don’t comply, and my suspicion is they do comply with our allowable limits. It would be very unlikely that we would exceed a regulatory threshold at those distances, but if we can put an instrument out there, we can collect some of that data ”

highly sensitive monitoring equipment, which includes microphones capable of hearing approaching footsteps, or cattle grazing nearby.

“Our largest event, there weren’t any complaints about,” he said.

In the end, the board directed Grijalva to collate further complaints, and urged neighbors with any further issues to continue to report them.

Chairman Richard Forster said the situation will be reagendaized at a later date to discuss whatever new data and reports are collected.

Supervisor Louis Boitano recused himself at the beginning of the session and did not take part in the discussion, due to a potential conflict of interest.

The PowerPoint presentation by Cochrane should be available on the county’s website this morning, Friday, Jan. 11.

The Amador County Board of Supervisors is scheduled to meet in regular session Jan. 22.