

Board addresses environmental role of mining operations

Proposed goal seeks to extend mining permits from 15-year review cycle

Will Houston, Eureka Times-Standard, 9-23-14

The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors straw voted through the draft General Plan's Mineral Resources section during its Monday review meeting where it discussed the environmental role of gravel mining while laying the foundation for extending the length of time between mining permit renewals.

In a 4-1 straw vote — with 3rd District Supervisor Mark Lovelace dissenting — the board approved a goal addressing the environmental role of in-stream mining of gravel and sand.

The board-approved goal now calls for: "Continued supplies of in-stream sand and gravel using extraction methods and rates that are consistent with state and federal endangered species regulations. Where possible, extraction should take place in a manner beneficial to endangered or threatened species."

Before the board deliberated on the goal, hydrologist Randy Klein of the County of Humboldt Extraction Review Team — referred to as CHERT — gave a presentation on gravel mining history in the county as well as CHERT's role as the county's authority in mine operation review. Klein said the average amount of gravel extracted by mines in the county has dropped by nearly 50 percent since CHERT formed in 1992. The drop resulted from collaborations between miners and regulatory agencies in order to reduce environmental impacts on streams and rivers that lowered stream bed elevations and also threatened infrastructure.

"They take almost all of it every year, about 100 percent of what's permitted," Klein said about the current mining thresholds.

While CHERT is not a regulatory agency, mines are required by federal and state regulators to undergo a CHERT review before the operation can be approved. As a gravel mining operation will have some sort of impact on the water system it is extracting from, Klein said mining projects are required to mitigate the loss in several ways, such as creating temporary wetland areas and alcoves for juvenile fish.

"As a river migrates, we feel mining should migrate as well," he said.

County Planning and Building Department staff recommended that the board include more specific information on in-stream mining operations' environmental role including working in a way that promotes endangered or threatened species recovery, protecting riparian corridors and preserving existing river bed elevations.

Representing the Eureka-based Mercer-Fraser Company and Eureka Ready Mix Concrete Co., attorney Mark Harrison of the Sacramento-based law firm Harrison, Temblador, Hungerford & Johnson said the staff recommended goal was too specific in miners' roles and stated that miners already work with CHERT and other agencies to alleviate these environmental impacts.

"If you do want to jump off the cliff with these other ideas, make it more general," he said.

After hearing Klein's presentation, Lovelace said the goal should include some type of language stating that mining operations should not adversely impact the river or stream bed, but the board chose not to include that in its vote.

PERMIT LENGTH

Later in the meeting, 5th District Supervisor Ryan Sundberg proposed to add new language to a goal which may allow the county to increase the duration of mining permits should the mining operations they are issued to be consistent with how much mineral volume they extract.

"Mining permits may be issued for any term consistent with the resource and subject to ongoing regulatory review," the new goal language states.

Under the county's mining code, mining permits must be reviewed and renewed by the county every 15 years, but Sundberg said there are several operations that have retained the extraction rates throughout their lifetime.

"If there is no changes or no issues, why make people go through that process?" he said.

Planning and Building Department Director Kevin Hamblin voiced support of the change, stating that this could lead to a future policy change.

"I think you're laying the foundation of allowing longer permits," he said.

The board voted to approve adding the language to the goal — which calls for a geographically distributed inventory of mining sites in the county — in a 5-0 straw vote.