

Finish line could finally be in sight for Cemex

Luke Money, Santa Clarita Valley Signal, 12-30-15

The decision by the Bureau of Land Management to yank Cemex mining firm's contracts to mine millions of tons of sand and gravel in Canyon Country shocked Santa Clarita Valley residents and politicians, who celebrated the Aug. 28 announcement.

"We were absolutely stunned when it happened," said Michael Murphy, intergovernmental relations manager for the city of Santa Clarita. "That is not what we thought was going to happen."

The news was most welcome after 16 years of work by local, state and federal officials to quash the plan for a 56-million-ton sand and gravel mine in Soledad Canyon. Progress over the years had been hard to come by.

Officials cheered the BLM's sudden about-face on the issue, saying it could finally put an end to a proposal that the city of Santa Clarita had long maintained would overload Highway 14 with truck traffic, choke Santa Clarita Valley air with particulates, and generally degrade the quality of life in the valley.

"What a day," Congressman Steve Knight, R-Palmdale, said succinctly when the news broke. "What a great, great day."

But while the BLM's decision may have dealt a significant blow to the proposed Soledad Canyon mine, the issue remains on the front burner as 2016 dawns. Cemex appealed the BLM decision in September, and the mine is in the hands of an appeals board.

It's not clear exactly when that appeals process will wrap up, but Knight — whose congressional district covers the entire Santa Clarita Valley — said in an interview Wednesday that he thinks more definitive news on the fate of the Cemex mine will come early next year.

"I think we are way closer on Cemex than people think," he said.

Cemex appeal

The BLM awarded Cemex two contracts in 1990 to extract 56 million tons of sand and gravel from hundreds of acres in Soledad Canyon in Canyon Country.

In the years since then, the BLM said, Cemex didn't make enough progress to fulfill the terms of the contracts. So the bureau rescinded both of them.

Cemex appealed in September. Company spokeswoman Sara Bouffard pledged the firm would "vigorously pursue all of its rights with respect to the project, including a reversal of this improper decision."

The matter now rests in the hands of the Interior Board of Land Appeals, which issue final decisions for the Department of the Interior. The department includes the Bureau of Land Management.

Officials from both Cemex and the BLM said earlier this month they didn't have any updates to share on the process.

The city is likewise awaiting additional word.

"We're not a direct party to the appeal, so we're like everyone else — we're waiting to see what the Interior Board of Land Appeals does," Murphy said. "We've tried to obtain information and we've gotten a little bit here and there."

Looking ahead

If the ruling comes down in favor of the BLM, the next step will be up to Cemex, Murphy said.

"My understanding is that the Interior Board of Land Appeals process is the final administrative appeal action and so, in the event that the Interior Board of Land Appeals sustains the department's decision, Cemex will then need to make a determination how they want to move forward," Murphy said. "Do they want to accept the final administrative decision or do they want to engage in litigation with the BLM?"

Should Cemex win its appeal, the fight against the mine would seem set to begin in earnest once more.

Knight has pledged to do whatever he can to keep the mine from being developed.

The first-term congressman said he does have Cemex legislation "ready if need be."

"We are way closer than we've ever been on this issue," Knight said. "We continue to be optimistic that we're going to get through this."

The goal, Knight said, remains the same as The Signal's banner headline on Aug. 29: "Mega-mine killed."

"We are working to kill it," Knight said of the mine. "Absolutely. That is our goal is to kill it."