

Federal, San Bernardino County pact aims to crush mining permit times

Jim Steinberg, San Bernardino Sun News, 1-25-16

SAN BERNARDINO -- Officials connected to the mining industry are hoping the recent agreement between county and federal officials will smooth out the permitting process for mining activity.

“I’ve seen permits that should take 30 days to get approved, take two years,” said Dinah Shumway, a Victorville-based economic geologist who does consulting for the mining industry.

Earlier this month, the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors approved a memorandum of understanding with the Bureau of Land Management for expedited environmental review and permitting of mining activities on federal lands administered by the BLM.

A key provision of the agreement allows for the hiring of qualified consultants to be hired by the BLM, and paid for by the county or project proponent, to analyze the project and its impacts.

The measure will provide additional assistance in the permitting process to a section within the BLM that has been hard hit by budget cuts, said Dana Wilson, a BLM spokeswoman.

“The process is not unlike an Environmental Impact Report processes in which a developer hires and pays for a consultant to do an EIR, which is then reviewed by a public agency before a project can move forward,” said David Wert, San Bernardino County spokesman.

The BLM will make the ultimate decision on the project, Wilson said.

“We operate with a lot of partners and a lot of MOU’s (memorandums of understanding) across the state...” as a result of the agency’s staff reductions.

Mines in the High Desert produce everything from gold, silver and iron ore to specialty clays. Local mines also produce sand, gravel and crushed stone used for making cement, concrete, asphalt and other building materials, said 1st District Supervisor Robert Lovingood.

“The residents and economy of San Bernardino County benefit from the mining industry and the jobs and tax revenue it creates,” Lovingood said.

“Hopefully this will allow projects to move through the system faster,” said Adam Harper, director of policy analysis for the California Construction and Industrial Materials Association.

If times are streamlined, it will likely promote mining investments in San Bernardino County, he said.

Harper said for a road construction project, where aggregates need to be mined, “time is everything.”

Shumway said that the permit she referred to that took two years, was just for an exploratory mine on about 1,000 square feet of BLM land.

“I am concerned that the plan has no timeline” for how work will proceed under the memorandum, she said.

Businesses considering mining exploration in activities San Bernardino County always ask about costs, Shumway said. And that’s difficult to estimate because the time frame for the permit is so unpredictable, she said.

For the two-person mining shop of Spokane, Washington-based Mud Hills Minerals Ltd., the memorandum is producing anxiety.

“Anytime government changes the way things are done there will be new forms and procedures to follow,” said Wally McGregor, a geologists and the mine’s owner.

The Mud Hills mine, north of Barstow, yields zeolite, which is used in water purification and other environmental cleanup.

Radiation absorbing zeolite mined at Mud Hills was used following the 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan, he said.