

Coastal Commission tells Cemex it must shut down sand mine.

David Schmalz, Monterey County Weekly, 3-23-16

The California Coastal Commission has drawn a line in the sand.

In a March 17 letter to Cemex, a multi-national concrete manufacturer based in Monterrey, Mexico, the commission informed the company that its sand mining operation in Marina is in violation of both the California Coastal Act and the city of Marina's Land Use Plan. The letter, written by Acting Executive Director John Ainsworth, orders Cemex to shut the mine down and restore the property, or face fines of several thousand dollars a day.

And though a legal battle may be in the offing, it's hard to overstate the impact on the coastline if – or perhaps when – the mine is ultimately shut down: Southern Monterey Bay has the highest coastal erosion rate in the state, and retired Naval Postgraduate School professor Ed Thornton, a coastal engineer, has long argued that the alarming erosion rate can be attributed to a primary culprit – the sand mine in Marina.

Thornton wrote a paper last fall that showed the erosion rate along local beaches, from the Salinas River to Wharf 2 in Monterey, is about 4 feet annually. At the lagoon on the beach in Marina, where Cemex draws in sand from a small dredging boat, Thornton says the erosion rate is 7.6 feet annually.

It is not publicly known how much sand Cemex has been drawing from the lagoon every year, as no agency required the company to report that number. In a 2006 email to the *Weekly*, a company spokesperson pegged the number at 300,000 tons annually.

If that much sand were left in the natural system, Thornton says, the impact will be transformative.

“On average, there will be [a buildup] of the shoreline,” he says. “That’s what my calculations say.”

Thornton adds the build up will be greatest on beaches closest to the sand mine, and that some parts of Monterey's beaches will still experience a net erosion.

For Thornton, the Coastal Commission's letter is the culmination of his 30-year battle against local sand mines, and is the result of an enforcement investigation the commission began six years ago after Thornton sent the agency a letter outlining some of his findings.

Cemex has until April 6 to respond with a “statement of defense,” in which the company can admit or deny the Coastal Act violations alleged in the letter.

Lisa Haage, the commission's chief of enforcement, says she's unsure whether Cemex will fight the issue in court. Sara Bouffard, a Cemex spokeswoman, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.