

Between a rock and a beautiful place

Naturalist John Muir would be flipping in his grave if he knew about the Azusa Rock Quarry expansion proposal

David Czamanske, Pasadena Weekly, 4-15-10

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When drivers along the Foothill (210) Freeway look north toward the entrance to San Gabriel Canyon, most notice the large scar on the rock face of the mountain on the canyon's west side.

Those in the know readily respond to inquires of "what is that?" as follows: "That" is the result of 90 years of mining in what is known as the Azusa Rock Quarry, located just north of Duarte but within Azusa city limits.

What some may not know is that the current owner, Vulcan Materials Co., the nation's largest producer of aggregate, is proposing a major expansion that will slice 600 feet off the ridge separating Fish Canyon, a tributary of the San Gabriel River containing a spectacular 100-foot waterfall, from residential areas in Duarte.

Not surprisingly, residents of Duarte are adamantly opposed to the plan, and Duarte's City Council has set aside \$700,000 to fight it by every legal means possible.

A showdown is expected at Monday's meeting of Azusa's City Council, when Vulcan's proposal for a modified conditional use permit, or CUP, and a new development agreement is up for a vote.

Vulcan is a relatively new owner of the quarry, having purchased it from Calmat in 1999. Vulcan inherited from Calmat a 50-year permit issued in 1988 to mine rock off the east side of Fish Canyon. This mining has scarred the mountain, created major desecration to the streambed of Fish Canyon and closed off trail access to the waterfall.

In its application for a modified CUP, Vulcan proposes to exchange its inherited right to mine on the east side of Fish Canyon for a permit to mine 105 million tons of rock over the next 28 years on the canyon's west side, thereby destroying Van Tassel Ridge.

In return, Vulcan promises to restore the streambed of Fish Creek and to reclaim the newly mined area, as well as previously mined rock slopes, through a technique known as micro-benching in which low-rise rock benches a foot or so wide are seeded with native vegetation after mining.

As a sweetener, Vulcan proposes in a draft development agreement to pay the city of Azusa \$1.5 million in advance extraction taxes 30 days after project approval and resolution of any litigation against the project, and to thereafter pay the city \$500,000 each year during the project's remaining 28 years of operation.

Save Our Canyon, an Azusa-based citizens' group opposing the project, has exhaustively examined the proposal and asserts that Vulcan's claims are suspect. While Vulcan claims the proposal to mine 80 acres on the west side of the canyon is a mere swap for its existing right to mine 80 acres on the east side, in actuality almost 20 acres on the east side has already been mined.

Save Our Canyon additionally points out that, according to city of Azusa public records, Vulcan has only paid \$44,000 in mining taxes during the last eight years. Meanwhile, Cemex, a gravel pit mining company operating in the city, paid \$5.7 million during the same time period.

A Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the project was released for a 45-day public comment period on Dec. 23. Hundreds of opponents testified at three public hearings held by Azusa's Planning Commission after the DEIR was released, but on March 10 the Commission voted 3-1 to support the CUP and the revised reclamation plan.

In response to residents' concerns about the health impacts of crystalline silica dust that will be generated by Vulcan's operations, representatives of the South Coast Air Quality Management District announced at an April 8 town hall meeting co-sponsored by the city of Duarte, Democratic Congresswoman Judy Chu and Assemblyman Anthony Portantino that it is asking Azusa to include more comprehensive analysis of the project's air quality effects before certifying the final EIR and voting on the proposed permit modification.

The Sierra Club's San Gabriel Valley Conservation Task Force evaluated Vulcan's proposal and submitted extensive comments on the draft EIR. The Sierra Club is opposed to the proposal because it will permanently disfigure Van Tassel Ridge, create additional dust and particulate air pollution, and continue restricting public access to Fish Canyon Falls, which is located in Angeles National Forest within Duarte city limits.

John Muir explored these mountains on a visit to Southern California in 1877 and declared them some of the most rugged he had ever encountered. He'd be turning over in his grave if he saw what mining has already done to this area, and he'd turn over a second time if he learned that mining expansion would soon chop down the most prominent ridge overlooking the entrance to San Gabriel Canyon.

(For further information, see extensive critical analysis of the project posted on the Web site of Save Our Canyon at saveourcanyon.org.)