

New data increases concern regarding air quality impact from mining project

Daniel Tedford, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 4-8-10

DUARTE -- An Azusa mining project's impact on air quality could be heightened, but remains within standards, according to new data presented by South Coast Air Quality Management District officials Thursday in a new round of comments on the project.

The AQMD previously submitted comments on an environmental report on Vulcan Materials Co.'s proposal to shift mining along its border.

In those comments, the district said the proposal would not worsen air quality compared with the current mining permit and the district did not sway from those comments at a town hall meeting in Duarte on Thursday.

But at the request of Duarte officials, AQMD analyzed the project using data from a temporary monitoring site used for an air quality study in the 2000s.

Using that monitoring site's standards, which do not fall within Environmental Protection Agency guidelines, air quality impacts associated with the project would increase and "the health risk assessment indicates a possibility of higher impacts," according to AQMD officials.

The impacts remained below state thresholds for pollution, but raised the level of uncertainty about air quality impacts, said AQMD Executive Officer Barry Wallerstein.

"The city of Azusa used the right data. Duarte asked what it would look like if they used (Duarte's site) data," Wallerstein said. "We have taken a very precautionary approach in doing some additional analysis requested by (Duarte), which creates some additional information that should be addressed in the final environmental impact report."

There is a public interest in the data presented Thursday and AQMD asked that Azusa add the findings to an environmental report on the project, which was finalized Thursday.

To help address concerns, AQMD plans on installing a permanent and official monitoring site at Royal Oaks Elementary School in Duarte.

The monitoring site would give AQMD the ability to measure the effects of mining on the city and take necessary action to limit impacts, if necessary, Wallerstein said.

Vulcan Materials Co. has a permit to mine 190 acres near Fish Canyon.

The company wants to exchange a permit to mine 80 acres on its eastern property line for the ability to mine 80 undisturbed acres near its western property line.

The 270-acre Vulcan property is in Azusa but rests near the Duarte border. For Vulcan to move forward, Azusa officials would have to approve Vulcan's plan to mine the western 80 acres. The proposal is scheduled to go to the City Council on April 19.

"The district has done an extensive analysis of our project as required by state law and by their admissions they have now done some last minute testing at the request of elected officials in Duarte using guidelines that have not been approved by the EPA," Vulcan spokesman Todd Priest said. "We look forward to receiving their final comments in writing, using sound science and state and federally approved guidelines."

Rep. Judy Chu, D-El Monte, spoke at Thursday's meeting in Duarte where about 100 residents and local officials attended to hear AQMD's report and comment on the proposal.

Chu said Azusa should reject the plan if concerns regarding efforts to reduce the impacts of the proposal on residents were not adequately addressed in the final environmental report.

"I know this is an issue of paramount importance for residents of Duarte and Azusa," Chu said. If the concerns are not addressed, "I urge (Azusa City Council) to deny the environmental impact report as written or send it back."

Duarte Councilman John Fasana said the issue of air quality and health was a major concern for his residents and was glad AQMD has taken time to analyze the potential affects of the project.

"I think they have some concerns, we will see what they are going to do," Fasana said. "We think it is important and time will tell if additional (monitoring) sites are necessary."

Azusa officials had no comment on AQMD's new findings and instead will wait until they can review the data before making a comment, Assistant Director of Economic and Community Development Conal McNamara.

In addition to their findings, AQMD also made some additional recommendations for Azusa regarding the project, including a cap on mining production at 6 million tons per year or less, no blasting during high wind or Santa Ana conditions, and enforcement that off-road engines referenced in the environmental report are used during production.