

Mountain deserves saving

Bill McEwen, Fresno Bee, 10-8-09

The Choinumni have a name for the rocky mountain at the base of the Sierra. They call it Wahahlish, meaning "someone cried."

Once the mountain -- and its wildflowers, burrowing owls, coyotes, rattlesnakes and native artifacts -- belonged to the Choinumni, a Yokut tribe whose members lived in villages near the Kings River but also looked for food in the adjoining foothills.

Now Jesse Morrow Mountain belongs to Cemex, which wants to mine and process aggregate there -- an operation that would consume about 40% of the acreage, spoil the views, foul the air and overload local roads.

But, while the global cement company holds title to the land, the mountain really belongs to everybody who has -- or might yet -- admire its beauty.

Yes, this humble mountain belongs to the thousands of tourists motoring along Highway 180 to Kings Canyon and Sequoia National parks. It's the first peak they see as they climb into the Sierra.

It also belongs to the folks who follow the Blossom Trail each spring. And to the people in the bed-and-breakfast stops who soak up the sight of rows of wine grapes finally giving way to the mountain.

Now, nearly a decade after another sand-and-gravel company bought the mountain and its 2,000 acres for \$2 million from a cattle rancher, Cemex wants to cash in.

The time to preserve Jesse Morrow Mountain and to stop all who would ruin it is now. Fresno County released the draft environmental impact report for the proposed project Friday, and you have until Dec. 1 to voice your opinions on the county's findings.

Tonight the county will pass out information from the report and accept written citizen comments in a 90-minute meeting that will start at 6 o'clock in the Sanger High School multipurpose room.

Four county planners and two consultants will be available to answer questions one on one, but county planning officials aren't planning a mass discussion of concerns.

"It's peculiar we have a process that minimizes public engagement," Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea says. "It didn't work well for the dairy ordinance" passed by the supervisors in 2007. "The strategy was not to let the people speak. That didn't work; it's not going to work now."

The report, which totals more than 700 pages, has been in the making for several years. It talks a lot about steps Cemex could take to lessen the destruction.

But it concludes that there would be "significant and unavoidable impacts" to the mountain's topography and vegetation. There also would be substantial harm to air, traffic and Choinumni cultural resources.

And while berms would hide some of the mining work while it's in progress, the end result would be a carved-up mountain.

In the report is a snapshot of a proposed deal between the mine operators and the Choinumni: the company would lease 40 acres on the mountain's north side to the tribe for \$1 a year for a cultural preservation center and give \$40,000 for the first 400,000 metric tons of aggregate shipped from the site. When the mine has all of its permits, the tribe would receive title to the 40 acres.

Grass-roots opposition to mining the mountain emerged when the project was announced in 2002. But volunteer efforts often are no match for corporations with deep pockets, expert lawyers -- and the support of elected officials who've accepted their campaign donations.

Supporters of the mining operation say that there is a shortage of aggregate in Fresno County. They claim that without this mine, building costs will go up. The operation would also create jobs and provide work for haulers.

But what about agricultural tourism, a job cluster that the Board of Supervisors claims to support? With spoiled views and more traffic, the mine might cost more jobs than it produces.

Besides, what price can you put on the sight of this mountain, its green slopes alive with the promise of all that is right with the world on a spring day? Why must Fresno County always cave to the wishes of the profiteers?

Once in awhile, we must protect what is ours. This is such a time. Jesse Morrow Mountain belongs to all of us.