

GROUP SUES OVER QUARRY

AMADOR COUNTY APPROVED PROJECT THAT WOULD MINE RIDGE FOR 50 YEARS

By ***Dana M. Nichols***

December 01, 2012

Record Staff Writer

IONE - At 94, Fraser West refers to himself as "an old cowboy."

Old enough that he's cut back. The Texas longhorns grazing outside his home number in the dozens now, rather than the hundreds he once ran.

But he says he's not ready to cut back on clean air, quiet or beauty.

That's why he's part of the Lone Valley Land, Air, and Water Defense Alliance, a group that's suing to overturn Amador County's approval of a quarry that over the next 50 years would mine and crush a 250-foot-tall ridge just south of his ranch.

"We don't want a quarry. We don't want an asphalt plant on the highway," West said, referring to another component of the Newman Ridge project a mile north of his ranch on Highway 104.

The lawsuit, filed in early November in Amador County Superior Court, argues that county officials violated California environmental law by approving the Newman Ridge project without adequate information about the air pollution, habitat destruction, traffic and other impacts it will cause. The Planning Commission approved the project in August. When opponents appealed, the Board of Supervisors upheld the approval in October.

County leaders, for their part, praised the quarry as an economic boon that will create dozens of jobs.

Amador County Counsel Gregory Gillott said he's confident records will show that the county conducted all necessary studies and that officials had a solid basis their decision on the project.

"The county's position is we've considered their objections to the project and the document. They were evaluated and considered and the board made this decision," Gillott said.

The 278-acre quarry and the 113-acre industrial plant site are part of a 16,100-acre portion of the Howard Ranch purchased in 2006 by investors including Farallon Capital Management of San Francisco, one of the world's largest hedge funds. (Charles Howard, the auto sales tycoon who formerly owned the ranch, was famed as the owner of the racehorse Seabiscuit.)

The Howard Ranch deal was the largest real estate transaction in the Sacramento region that year, the Sacramento Business Journal reported.

Another 12,300-acre portion of the Howard Ranch had been purchased by the Nature Conservancy in 1999 and placed in conservation easements.

Project documents say that over decades, Newman Ridge would gear up until it was extracting 5 million tons a year of rock. Crushers on site would grind it to chunks five inches diameter or less and a conveyor belt 11/2 miles long would carry the material to the industrial plants on Highway 104, where it would be shipped to customers or used in concrete or asphalt mixes.

Neighbors aren't the only ones who have had concerns about the Newman Ridge project. Government agencies including the Central Valley Water Quality Control Board, the state Office of Mine Reclamation, the state Department of Fish and Game and the California Department of Transportation sent letters saying that the environmental studies were flawed or inadequate.

They raised issues ranging from the safety impacts of routing increased heavy truck traffic through the nearby town of Lone to loss of habitat along Dry Creek and harm to threatened species such as the California tiger salamander and California red-legged frog.

Meanwhile, Newman Minerals spokesman Thomas Swett said in an email that the lawsuit "will not disrupt the long-term timeline for the project."

Swett said the project will generate about 175 jobs during construction and 60 during operations once construction is done. Construction is scheduled to happen over the next six years.

"Over a million dollars and years of time were committed to the careful analysis of all potential impacts and mitigations for the project, including those for air, habitat, and traffic," Swett wrote. "The County's EIR (environmental impact report) is in all respects proper and we are confident that the court will agree."

West, for his part, is confident that project opponents will ultimately win in court, although he admits that might take a while.

"Hopefully we can get this thing settled," West said. "If it's dragged on, I may or may not be here."

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.

http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20121201/A_NEWS/212010322&cid=sitesearch

Planned strip mine upsets neighbors

Neighbors of a recently-approved aggregate mine and asphalt plant near Ione are fighting the project in court, arguing that Amador County leaders broke California environmental laws when they approved it.



Source: Amador County

KORRY HANSEN/
The Record