

Quarry facing hurdles Some in Valley Springs oppose plan to expand

Dana M. Nichols
Record Staff Writer
Published Friday, Dec 30, 2005

VALLEY SPRINGS - A letter-writing campaign by neighbors as well as environmental issues are jeopardizing plans to expand operation of a rock quarry in Valley Springs.

Calaveras County planning commissioners were set to vote Thursday on whether to allow Ford Construction Co. to increase production at its gravel quarry below Hogan Dam by 500 percent, to as much 500,000 tons a year.

But after receiving letters and e-mails from dozens of quarry neighbors opposing the increase, county planning officials have pulled the item off the agenda.

Most of those letters cited noise and the danger from increased truck traffic, but some also expressed concern over sediment flows into the Calaveras River or other environmental risks from increased quarry operations.

John Anderson, the county planner overseeing the application, said his department needs to conduct a new traffic study on the effects on area roads of increasing quarry truck traffic to an average of 64 round trips a day.

Jerry Middleton, project manager for Ford Construction, said his company did not ask to be removed from the agenda and he isn't sure why county officials made the decision.

"I don't know," he said. "It might be something to do with people being on vacation over the holidays."

Letters from state regulators suggest environmental problems - specifically, the possible flow into the Calaveras River of fine sediment from rock crushing and transport - may be a sticking point.

A Dec. 22 letter from the California Department of Conservation Office of Mine Reclamation said the county's initial study of the proposed expansion failed to provide necessary information on what effects it would have on air quality, plants and animals, and to any area "cultural resources," a term that usually refers to archeological sites or historic buildings.

The letter stressed the agency needed information on what the expansion might mean for wildlife.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board in a Dec. 14 letter said Ford Construction's proposed expansion would require the company to update its plan for preventing water pollution from storm runoff.

"Of course, there is a water quality concern if there is sediment getting into a river," said Mark List, a senior engineering geologist on the board. List said stormwater issues are handled by another division of the regional board and referred questions to that division.

Local activists, however, are making sure both state and county officials know about sediment that quarry trucks have been tracking onto a bridge just outside the quarry entrance, where it can then be washed into the river. Joyce Techel, a kennel owner in Valley Springs, took photographs of the mud and sediment and sent them to the county.

Ford Construction's 2002 pollution discharge permit from the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board requires it to keep sediment from gravel washing and other operations from reaching the river.

Sediment is an issue because both salmon and steelhead spawn downstream. Sediment can ruin spawning beds. It can also irritate property owners.

"Silt and sediment will bring on lawsuits for sure," downstream property owner Jerome Cottrell wrote in a Nov. 29 letter to the county.

Both the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center and the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance have called for a full environmental review of the expansion rather than the much less extensive initial study conducted by the county.

Truck traffic, however, is the issue that has provoked the biggest response so far.

"The noise from the trucks as they use their exhaust brakes (jake brakes) and downshifting to make more noise is unbearable," wrote Robert McCafferty, who lives on Silver Rapids Road, the route the trucks use to get to Highway 26.

"You can't sit and enjoy your own porch. Now the quarry expects us to put up with more."

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 754-9534 or dnichols@recordnet.com



A large rock quarry expansion proposed by Ford Construction Co. has raised opposition from some Valley Springs residents

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