

Hearing set for proposed Sunny Valley gravel mine

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By Jeff Duewel of the Daily Courier

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SUNNY VALLEY — A proposed gravel mine in the works for six years will get its first public hearing on Monday, the first of many for a project that is opposed by residents in this rural area north of Grants Pass.

Sunny Valley Sand and Gravel hopes to mine up to 6 million cubic yards of aggregate and employ 20 people over the next 20 years.

"Sand and gravel is the foundation of civilization. We need it," said company President Andreas Blech of Grants Pass, who submitted a 1,400-page application in March. "We have a product we want to sell."

"I spent four years looking for a place to live out my days," said 76-year-old John Ahlf, who lives on Placer Road near the proposed operation. "If I knew there was going to be a gravel pit here, I wouldn't have moved here."

That's a preview of the coming months, as the proposal wades through over a dozen government agencies over traffic, noise, water, air quality, fish and other issues.

Monday's first step is for the Josephine County Planning Commission to determine if the site meets standards for what is classified a "significant aggregate site," defined as producing 60,000 cubic yards or more.

"They have to prove volume and quality of material. It's a threshold determination in order to go on to the next phase," said Dennis Lewis, director of county planning.

On May 12, discussions over mining operations will commence, provided the plan gets significant site status as expected, Lewis said. Eventually the county commission would have to sign off on the planning department's recommendation.

"This is just the dress rehearsal," Lewis said.

The volume of rock seems only slightly more than the volume of the planning documents in this one.

"This is the most complex application that Josephine County has ever seen," Blech said.

Blech, who was involved in agriculture and land development in Central California before coming north in 2007, said it makes sense for Josephine County to develop more sources of aggregate, mainly sand, gravel and crushed stone, which are crucial to construction and road building. He said he's attempting to alleviate the concerns of Sunny Valley residents, whom he's met with a few times. There are several homes within a mile of the site, on Daisy Mine Road, Placer Road and side streets.

Roads and site excavation began in 2012 as the company dug test wells and sampled the rock, digging pits.

Blech said he plans to build berms and use trees to lessen noise, operate five days a week and stop by 5 p.m., and reclaim the land as the mining is done in phases. The reclamation calls for ponds and lakes.

"I'm trying to be a good citizen," he said.

Some neighbors aren't convinced.

"I'm 2,000 feet away, across the road, and we always get the same speech — that they want to be good neighbors," said Ann Smith.

She listed off her complaints: "Dust and noise, fish in the creek, Placer Road is the only way through the valley, it's used by school buses and pedestrians, and those trucks can't stop fast."

Water appears to be the biggest issue. Aggregate operations need a lot of it to wash gravel and control dust.

The property borders Grave Creek, a spawning stream for coho salmon and steelhead. Landowners are also concerned about the effect on their wells.

But in 2012 the Oregon Water Resources Department denied the company's application to use water from wells dug on the site, citing potential effects on fish and flow in Grave Creek.

The work by county planning over zoning is independent of rulings by other agencies, such as the state Water Resources Department and the Department of Geology & Mineral Industries. The company will still have to meet requirements of those agencies.

Blech said the company is "ready to start the next day" if and when approval occurs. Lewis said it will likely be late summer before the county is done with evaluation, and it's anyone's guess to the other agencies.

For Blech it's a no-brainer to use natural resources to improve the economy.

"Part of the solution to Josephine County's woes is jobs," he said.

Mine meeting set

- WHAT: Josephine County planning meeting
- WHEN: 6 p.m. Monday
- WHERE: Anne Basker

Auditorium, 500 N.W. Sixth St., Grants Pass

- HOT TOPIC: First public hearing for proposed gravel mine in Sunny Valley

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