

Increase in mining traffic heightens Valley air pollution worries

By Kurtis Alexander, staff writer
Fresno Bee, Sat., May 19, 2012

Kathy Omachi was eating at McDonald's in Reedley recently, and she counted 51 gravel trucks pass by -- all in the time she finished a hamburger and fruit smoothie.

The lifelong resident of this farming town, which is southeast of Fresno and within a few miles of three rock quarries, fears that even more trucks, with their dirty exhaust, will be on the road if nearby mining is expanded.

And that is exactly what is in the pipeline.

The owners of Fresno-based Gerawan Farming are seeking approval for a 900-acre sand and gravel mine, and asphalt plant just north of Reedley.

This is on top of a handful of other mining projects trying to get off the ground in the rural Kings River basin east of Sanger, which is quickly replacing the San Joaquin River region as ground zero for mined construction materials.

Among the projects is the highly controversial dig at Jesse Morrow Mountain.

"The trucks and the mines are already impacting our air quality here," Omachi said. "You can imagine in 10 years, when you have more gravel mines on line, how much worse it's going to be."

The Valley has long had among the state's worst air pollution.

Last week, the final environmental report for Gerawan Farming's mine was released. It not only outlines potential problems with the project but the combined effects of all the proposed mines. It calls the toll on air quality "significant and unavoidable."

Proponents of mining acknowledge that dust and exhaust are inevitable at quarries. But they contend the mines are but a tiny contributor to the dirty air that plagues the central San Joaquin Valley.

New technologies have enabled quarry operators to significantly curtail pollution, and advocates say locally mined construction material actually can reduce air emissions by eliminating the need for trucks to haul material over long distances and spew unnecessary exhaust.

"The aggregate is going to be needed to build roads and schools," said Mike Mallery, project manager for Gerawan Farming's proposed mine. "By having a local source that's closer to the marketplace, it's a good thing. It actually helps the air in that way."

Mallery said the owners of family-owned Gerawan Farming live within miles of the project. That, he said, will ensure that the mine will tread as lightly as possible.

Cumulative effect

Gerawan Farming's project, known commonly as the Carmelita mine, meets local standards for air emissions, according to the new environmental report.

Individually, so do the proposed Jesse Morrow Mountain mine four miles away and three other recently approved mine expansions within five miles of the Carmelita site.

The problem is that other sources of air pollution, such as cars, already emit the same pollutants as mines -- and at levels that are considered hazardous. That means even limited emissions from new mines are potentially dangerous.

The situation is worsened by the sheer number of mines that could open, note the opponents of mining, who have organized in protest of some of the proposals.

The pollutants of concern are particulate matter, such as dust, that contributes to the Valley's wintertime fog and causes respiratory illness, and nitrogen oxides, the gases from combustible sources that form unhealthy ozone.

Local air regulations dictate what an individual mine can emit and don't bar projects simply because there may be too much pollution coming from elsewhere.

"As the lead agency, the county must make a decision about whether these cumulative impacts are significant," said Dave Warner, permit services director at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "It's a much more squishy analysis for them."

Both the Carmelita and Jesse Morrow Mountain proposals await hearings before the Fresno County Planning Commission. No dates have been set.

The commission already held one hearing on the Jesse Morrow Mountain project, but because of the large number of people wanting to speak against the mine, the matter was postponed.

Another air-quality issue the county will have to contend with, since it's also not covered by local air regulations, is vehicle emissions from the projects. While the air district regulates on-site emissions, it doesn't set standards for trucks that come and go, even if the project is directly responsible for the traffic.

The Carmelita project, off of Reed Avenue near the Reedley Municipal Airport, would generate an average 700 daily round-trips, according to the environmental report.

The Jesse Morrow Mountain project off Highway 180 is expected to bring nearly 500 trips. That is on top of the hundreds of trips already made to and from existing mines.

Truck exhaust from both the Carmelita and Jesse Morrow Mountain mines, according to the environmental documents, would produce nitrogen oxides several times above what is allowed at the sites.

A representative of materials company Cemex, which is proposing the Jesse Morrow Mountain mine, said a lot of the truck exhaust expected with the new projects doesn't represent new emissions but merely replaces exhaust from existing mines that will soon close.

Cemex, like other companies with local mining operations, anticipates that quarries along the San Joaquin River will run out of materials and shut down.

This is largely what is driving the push to mine closer to the Kings River.

Beyond air quality, the new environmental impact report suggests that many of the potential problems with the proposed mines -- regarding wildlife or water supplies, for example -- can be averted or reduced considerably.

The loss of farmland and disruption to scenery, particularly at the very visible Jesse Morrow Mountain, are problems that are harder to solve, according to the report.

Officials at the Reedley airport also have raised concerns that mining might occur too close to their landing strip.

Demand will grow

In the push for mining near the Kings River, industry proponents have underscored the need for construction materials in the Fresno area.

Existing mines have only a fraction of the sand and gravel that will be necessary for development in Fresno County over the next 50 years, according to the state Department of Conservation.

The most recent state study, though it is 5 years old and construction activity has since declined, suggests that a deficit of materials remains. Mining permits, according to the study, have been obtained in Fresno County for only about 71 million tons of aggregate while 629 million tons is the projected long-term need.

The Carmelita mine, the largest of the current proposals, is expected to yield 1.25 million tons of aggregate a year over its 100-year life.

Jesse Morrow Mountain would yield 1.5 million tons a year over 50 years.

Opponents of the recent mining projects don't dispute the need for construction materials. But they say there may be other options worth considering. Importing the material is most obvious.

While trucking is widely believed to be too expensive and does little to improve air quality, rail has been pitched as an alternative.

Cemex officials, who already transport a lot of aggregate by train nationwide, say rail is not nearly as viable as getting materials locally.

That is why it hasn't been done on any significant scale here.

"You're going to realize real cost-savings to infrastructure projects because you have aggregate in your backyard," said Sara Engdahl, communications director for Cemex.

But Roger Van Groningen, president of the Fowler-based shipping company Van G Logistics, says the economics of rail are likely to change.

"As soon as the market turns and becomes stronger, it will be viable to import materials by rail," he said.

Mines in other parts of California as well as in Nevada and Arizona have excess material that could be brought to Fresno County, Van Groningen said, and the infrastructure for doing so is largely in place.

Michelle McDonald, who lives outside Sanger, is one who hopes that an alternative can be found. Her farm is squeezed between one of the expanding mines, Central Valley Ready Mix, and where the Carmelita project is proposed.

"We were hoping our children would want to come home and farm with us. But I don't know if they're going to want to do that with all these mines," she said, noting that her grandson has asthma. "I know if I were starting out with young children, I don't know if I'd want to put them in all this air pollution."

Bio energy planned for North Fork

By Brian Wilkinson

Sierra Star, Thursday, May 17, 2012

The North Fork Community Development Council has an agreement with Reliable Renewables of Houston, Texas, to develop a \$4 million biomass power generation facility on the old mill site on Road 255.

The facility will generate about one megawatt of electricity, enough to power about 1,000 homes according to Elissa Brown, former Madera County grant writer and consultant with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

Brown presented an overview of the project at a recent North Fork Town Hall meeting hosted by 5th District Supervisor Tom Wheeler.

Brown said the power generated by the plant will be used on the old mill site for current and future businesses and for the community. Excess power generated by the plant will be sold to a utility company. Utility companies, by state law, must purchase a certain amount power supplied by renewable sources.

"The project is a strategic step to develop economic uses for forest biomass material generated as a result of forest management tree removal and hazardous fuel reduction in our area," Brown said.

One truck load a day (22 tons) of chipped small-diameter timber and brush from a 30-mile radius would be used to fuel the facility.

Brown said that with the biomass power generation facility, the development council hopes to meet a number of objectives including jobs for area residents, create an income stream for the council to further promote mill site redevelopment and support subsidiary operations such as biomass harvesting, chipping and transportation.

The plant will also produce heat that can be used to dry green wood for gasification and prepare sawdust for pelletizing.

The facility will meet stringent emissions standards of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and no waste water will be created.

Although the business model is not finalized, the Community Development Council will provide the land for the project and will share in the economic benefit. Reliable Renewables will arrange for financing and provide the necessary expertise and technology.

At the heart of the plant, according to Zac Scott, managing partner of Reliable Renewables, will be the gasifier that transforms the biomass into methane and hydrogen that runs through a generator to create electricity. The footprint for the building that will house the gasifier will be about 12 by 40 feet and the generator will utilize a building about 20 by 40 feet.

"Our energy centers produce no smoke and discharge no effluent," said Scott. "Placing an energy center near a forest area such as North Fork is economical because shipping biomass long distances, piling slash and thinnings and pile burning are no longer necessary."

"We are excited to work with the community of North Fork and believe biomass generated electricity is a way for communities to use what they produce," Scott said. "We'll also be reducing hazardous fuel in the surrounding area."

Considering financial arrangements, permitting and construction, Scott feels the plant could be in operation in about two years.

Although the North Fork plant will be only the second in the United States built by the company, Reliable Renewables has sister companies in Europe and Latin America and have developed 10 plants in Europe.

"What we are doing in North Fork will be the newest version of the technology available," Scott said. "It will be easier to operate and very reliable."

Three similar plants are currently being built in Italy by the company and a plant is under development at a saw mill in Ashville, Mass. that should be in operation within 18 months.

"We've been working years to revitalize the mill site so it's great to see the biomass project moving forward," Wheeler said. "This particular project will create jobs, reduce hazardous fuels and help clean the forest."

Petition mounted to ban gold mining near Yosemite

By Kevin Fagan, staff writer
S.F. Chronicle, Sat., May 19, 2012

The specter of giant gold-mining rigs chewing into the slopes of the Sierra and spewing toxins into Yosemite National Park has an environmental group fanning out across the state collecting petitions to ban mining within 10 miles of the park.

Environment California, a nonprofit advocacy group, hopes to gather 50,000 signatures by the end of the summer asking President Obama for a ban like the one his administration enacted in January forbidding new mining claims near the Grand Canyon.

There aren't any big industrial mining operations active now near Yosemite, advocates of a ban said. But with the price of gold having tripled in recent years, to \$1,583 per ounce as of last week, there's been a rush to stake out mining claims in the historic Gold Rush areas around the park.

At any time, mining opponents say, any of these could be turned into a huge dig site.

"Industrial mining is one of the biggest, dirtiest and most dangerous businesses around," said Dan Jacobson, legislative director of the Sacramento group. "Obviously, you don't want that around the crown jewel of American parks."

Mining has long been prohibited within Yosemite, but there are 185 mining claims recorded within 10 miles of the park's borders, mostly in the Stanislaus National Forest. More than half of those have been staked out since 2006 - when gold was selling for only \$500 an ounce - according to a report by the Pew Environment Group.

"Most of those are mom-and-pop operations," Jacobson said. "But no matter how small they are, there is always the threat of them selling to a big company if they find significant gold there and becoming big."

Gold Rush poisons

He pointed out that to this day, mercury, lead and cyanide contamination exists throughout the Sierra from Gold Rush-era mining operations. Any such contamination today, he said, could poison peregrine falcons, black bears and other wildlife "that don't recognize borders and fly over from Yosemite."

"We'll be collecting signatures online and on the streets all over the state," Jacobson said. The group plans to have several dozen volunteers helping out.

Mining advocates scoff at Jacobson's fears, and say a ban would infringe on business and individual rights.

"The technology has come a long way and the country has, too, since the old days of mining," said Mark Compton, government affairs manager for the Northwest Mining Association, an industry advocacy group. "There are systems in place now to make sure cyanide and other chemicals don't go leaching into the watershed."

Outdated fears

Among those holding a claim within 10 miles of Yosemite are directors of the Gold Prospectors Association of America, which encourages anyone with a lust for nuggets to head up the mountainsides.

"I don't think these radical environmental groups have a clue about what gold mining is about," said Brad Jones, editor at the association. "They're looking at how mining used to be 150 years ago. They're thinking of old practices like using huge water cannons to erode whole mountainsides, things that have been outlawed for decades.

"Gold miners are actually good for the environment, because we pick up trash and take care of the areas we prospect in," Jones said. The proposed ban, he said, is "just an effort to take public land away from the people."

Anyone can stake a mining claim with a \$189 fee and a form to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. But Compton said turning a claim into a sizable operation requires about a decade of environmental hearings and permitting involving a wide range of communities and government agencies.

"We have the longest mining-permit process in the world," he said. "In Australia and Canada, it only takes about two years. And here, if you can't prove that your mining operation will operate cleanly and safely, it won't go forward."

Park watches, waits

Yosemite National Park spokesman Scott Gediman said he can understand the interest in whether there's gold in them thar hills. Mining has been prohibited in Yosemite since President Abraham Lincoln set the land aside as a forest reserve in 1864, he said, but plenty of wallets have been filled by mining money earned just outside park borders in places like Mariposa.

"The area is rich in mining history - this is the Mother Lode, after all," Gediman said. "We don't have yes-or-no authority on mining operations nearby, but obviously we'd be concerned if there was any potential water or air pollution.

"There's a lot of hurdles an operation would have to go over, however," Gediman said. "And yes, an operation could potentially spill into the park. But do we feel these claims outside the park are immediate threats? No."

[Fresno Bee commentary, Sat., May 19, 2012:](#)

Try joining cyclists on road in Bike Month

By Katie Kellum

May is "Bike Month," and about 800 Fresnans (not even 1% of the population) have registered to become a part of the "I Bike Fresno Challenge." These happy individuals have pledged to ride one million miles, collectively.

I would like to make a few suggestions so we can all get along a little better out there on the roads.

Riding a bike in Fresno can be very difficult -- Fresno is spread out, and most "pleasure" bike rides are distances that others ride in marathon training. Please keep in mind this trek is a choice.

I feel there is nothing less than a "bully" mentality on the streets of Fresno in regard to road bikers. I know that I am not alone in feeling this way.

Sometimes, bikers have to take streets without proper bike lanes, which means a driver might have to move over a few feet to avoid killing the innocent biker. I am sorry this seems to create such a problem for people, but is there really any need to speed by in a car, dramatically swerving into two other lanes, honking or yelling?

I don't understand this at all. Quite honestly, it's incredibly rude.

It's a shame that it is so scary to ride a bike around Fresno, and it makes me really sad. Fresno bikers are not only trying to improve the air quality, their health and save money, but they are working hard to change the car culture of Fresno.

Gas is \$4 a gallon, and it takes at least a gallon of gas to get anywhere in this town. We have the worst air in the country, and the highest DUI rates as well, and Fresno is just as fat (35% of adults being obese, 100 pounds or more overweight) as the rest of the country, so no awards there.

Any rational person can see the solution here -- ride your bike! So why do Fresnoans seem to hate road bikers?

I would really appreciate it if drivers were just a little nicer to road bikers. Please stop accelerating around us; it is frightening. We are not trying to race against you because we know we would lose.

Please stop yelling at us, we can't hear what you're saying anyway (and no, lady road bikers probably don't want to date you, so please stop harassing them with cat calls).

Please give us three feet in the farthest right hand lane to ride when there are no bike lanes; we don't want to die. Please stop making a point of invading two or three lanes to "get around us," it's a serious threat to other drivers and yourself, not to mention completely unnecessary.

Another thing that's very bothersome when we're trying to ride our bikes, is breathing in nasty cigarette smoke, so please, don't blow it in our direction at red lights, it is not funny.

And while I'm asking, maybe take a second to think about dusting off your own bike. Biking is really fun, healthy, and you feel pretty awesome when you bike to places you'd normally drive.

I would like to invite Fresno residents to check out this little movement, www.ibikefresno.org, maybe save some money and gain a new perspective.

Pledge 10 miles, 50 or even 100! I hope you don't experience any of this bullying, but if you do, next time you get in your car to drive, I bet you'll be nicer to bike riders.

These are just some things to think about, kindness and respect -- we could all use a little more of that, right?

Fresno is bound to see more bikers on the road during this month, so I hope drivers can change their behavior just a tiny bit. I'm not asking drivers to make concessions for us, I'm asking for the same respect you would give any other human being,

or driver, on the road.

Bikers have every right to be there, just like you!

Katie Kellum of Fresno works as an Americorps volunteer and enjoys cycling.