

Sunol quarry makes friends in deals to help environment and pay community

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Oliver de Silva agrees to modify Apperson Ridge quarry project, and pay \$50,000 a year toward Sunol community improvements

SUNOL -- Environmentalists and Sunol residents for many years criticized plans to open a rock quarry on Apperson Ridge, a remote area where tule elk roam and eagles soar.

Critics said the development would mar wilderness between two large regional parks.

But now the Oliver de Silva Inc. quarry company has mended fences with its critics with two agreements that make the quarry plan more environmentally friendly and provide \$50,000 a year for Sunol community improvements.

The deals, one of which was announced last week, have eased old animosities in one of Alameda County's longest-running environmental disputes. Alameda County approved the Apperson Ridge quarry on private land in 1984, but it still has yet to open, and may not for decades.

"I personally thought it was a mistake to mine that beautiful mountain," said Pat Stillman, a longtime resident of the town where the 1,000 residents have a tradition of guarding their area's bucolic character. "But I think de Silva has done a lot lately to make the plan better."

Jim Summers, a de Silva vice president, said his company negotiated the deals over years out of a commitment to be sensitive to the environment and Sunol residents. "We want to be a good neighbor," he said.

Environmentalists praised de Silva for making a 2009 agreement with two conservation groups.

The deal delays the Apperson Ridge quarry opening until the later of two dates: 2030 or when rock quarrying stops at an existing pit, a relatively flat plot of land on Calaveras Road east of Interstate 680, that De Silva has obtained the lease to operate on. The San Francisco Water Department owns that land.

De Silva is seeking permission from Alameda County to expand the old quarry site -- called Surface Mining Permit-30 -- into 58 adjacent acres, keeping the pit open for perhaps three decades longer.

If the expansion is approved, De Silva pledges to change the Apperson Ridge quarry plan in several other ways.

The company would drop plans to build a five-mile road through undeveloped areas to the ridge quarry site in favor of a conveyor belt to transport rock to the SMP-30 quarry to be crushed, cleaned and processed into aggregate, concrete and asphalt.

De Silva also would abandon plans to build the crushing and processing plants at the Apperson Ridge site -- reducing impacts on wildlife habitat between Sunol and Ohlone regional wildernesses.

The quarry company also would contribute large sums to help Alameda Creek fish and a local tule elk herd.

"We feel this was a groundbreaking agreement in reducing environmental impacts," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. It signed the 2009 agreement along with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The idea of the truce is to shift environmental impacts away from the sensitive ridge into an existing quarry in operation for decades.

In the deal announced last week with Save Our Sunol, Oliver de Silva pledged to pay \$50,000 a year into a fund for projects to benefit the Sunol community, as recommended by a local advisory panel.

The payments -- to continue for up to 30 years during the life of the SMP-30 quarry -- would be used for projects such as park improvements to enhance the community -- not for routine filling of potholes, said Stillman, president of Save Our Sunol.

The quarry company also pledged to work with the East Bay Regional Park District and the San Francisco Water Department to help plan a trail from the Sunol water temple to Sunol Regional Park.

While the De Silva quarry is some two miles away from Sunol homes, the payments compensate Sunol residents for the effects of "industrialization" on the town, Stillman said.

Summers said the quarry company agreed to the payments as a "gesture of good will toward neighbors."

Save Our Sunol members will have a party at 5 p.m. Sunday to celebrate the agreement benefiting their community.