

Quarry tests discount threat of groundwater contamination

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SANTA CRUZ — Reports from a quartet of test wells drilled at the Quail Hollow Quarry near Felton indicate that sand mining there poses no current threat to groundwater.

However, County Planning Director Dianne Guzman has cautioned that the results are not conclusive because a three-year drought has lowered water tables in the area.

The quarry has been embroiled in controversy since early this year. The quarry's owner, Granite Rock Co., and its operator, Santa Cruz Aggregates, want to expand mining to the quarry's south ridge. Area residents are opposed to the proposed expansion.

Granite Rock and Santa Cruz Aggregates contend they have a "vested right" to mine the ridge, under already-issued permits. But the county Planning Commission contends that neither the quarry's original permit in 1955, nor subsequent permits for quarry expansion issued in 1962 and 1964, cover the south ridge.

The Planning Commission issued its ruling in February, and the two firms

appealed the decision to the Board of Supervisors.

During subsequent hearings before the board, residents charged that quarry operations were threatening both groundwater and surface water. Celia Scott-Von der Muhll, an environmentalist attorney retained by the South Ridge Watershed Association to fight the expansion, demanded that supervisors look into the residents' charges and consider halting all quarry operations until an investigation could be completed.

The quarry's owner and operators later agreed to let an independent hydrologist conduct tests on the property.

Residents then charged that Santa Cruz Aggregates had piled sand on the quarry floor to increase the separation between the base of their mining operations and the underlying water table.

Four test wells were drilled in late June. Two wells, drilled to 60 feet, were dry. One well hit water-saturated sand at 46 feet, while another struck water about 78 feet, according to consultant Nicholas M. Johnson, who observed the test borings.

Mining is not considered a threat to

groundwater as long as it doesn't come within 20 feet of the water table.

Guzman reported to supervisors late last week that the test drilling "results ... do not support a conclusion that the quarry has intercepted groundwater."

While she noted that the results were "inconclusive," thanks to a three-year drought, the planning director said that there was no need for a "stop-work" order. "Assuming that sand has not been replaced on the quarry floor," she added, "continued mining in the location currently being mined ... would not appear to pose an imminent hydrological threat. ..."

But Guzman said that the test wells should be continuously monitored to see if the groundwater rises.

Guzman also reported to supervisors that the quarry operators had been asked to dig at least two pits with a backhoe, so that a geologist could determine whether sand had in fact been replaced on the quarry floor. She said the operators had not yet responded to this request.

Supervisors are to consider the quarry matter during a hearing set for 1:30 p.m. Tuesday.