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Sand Plant Has Answers

(Second of three stories.)

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The Felton Sand Plant run by Kaiser Industries Corp., one of the mining operations responsible for those unsightly white slashes on the Scotts Valley hillsides, claims it works hard to appease citizen complaints of its operations.

Plant Manager Bill Berger points out with pride the experimental efforts at revegetation and reforestation, the lack of water waste and the work being done behind small hillsides to hide the operations from view, as evidence of the company's efforts to soften the impact on the environment.

Recently, the 275-acre operation has come under fire from nearby residents over alleged violations of its 1958 use permit.

Complaints have been aimed at noisy night operations, ground vibration, traffic violations by trucks, erosion and ground movement, dust and problems with water flow off Conference Drive.

Kaiser officials have a defense for each allegation.

Even though Kaiser's use permit states, "operations shall be conducted only during daylight hours," Berger claims that this does not include trucking at night which is necessary to keep up with competitors.

In order to load the trucks at night, air operated gates and the loading bunkers and belt conveyors are used, along with occasional tractor-like machines for loading, Berger admitted.

A recent Environmental Impact Report (EIR) done on the operation states that "existing quarry operations and related truck traffic are not significantly affecting local community noise levels."

The EIR continues, however, to suggest, "Should it be determined that noise from trucks during usually quiet hours is causing a significant disturbance in Scotts Valley, the County could consider restricting shipping hours."

Berger responded that curtailing shipping hours would

create a severe hardship on the company's customers, many of who need the materials early in the morning.

He also pointed out that trucks are expensive to operate and it would be a hardship on the owners not to be able to run them. Limiting the hours, he added, would concentrate the operations into a shorter time period, making them have even a greater effect.

Kaiser, the report points out, is the only sand quarry in the area currently shipping entirely by trucks and is responsible for about 80 per cent of the sand truck traffic through Scotts Valley and 60 to 65 per cent of the sand truck traffic down Highway 17.

With the planned addition of glass sand production, trucking and the related noise and pollution could increase by 7 per cent representing "an unavoidable adverse impact," the report added.

To assess the noise situation, Berger stated that the company is contacting nearby residents to determine the extent of the problem.

Complaints have also been aired that the trucks speed and do not observe stop signs before entering Conference Drive. Berger stated that the drivers have been notified and that two

speed bumps have been constructed on the exit driveway.

Observers also may be wondering what Kaiser plans to do with the slashes the mining operation causes on the hillsides. Berger is proud to point out the revegetation and reforestation experiments the company is conducting.

The scars will remain for the next 10 to 20 years while the current operations continue. Once all the sand is mined from an area, then the company will begin to replant the remaining permanent slopes, he said.

"Since 1970, when I became plant manager, I started a process of figuring out what was going to grow here and what would not. With the sand soils we have here, there are not that many people who know what will grow."

Several experimental groves of trees and patches of grass have been tried out with the Monterey Pine, Ponderosa Pine and rye grasses having the most success, Berger added.

"A naturally exposed sand slope would normally take about five years to revegetate itself. I feel I can accomplish in one year what nature does in five to cover the sand," he said with pride.

The revegetation and reforestation efforts also will

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keep down the dust level complained about, Berger stated. The company also waters down paved roads daily to wash away dust and uses coherex, a dust retardant, on large exposed sand areas.

Another way Kaiser is attempting to soften the visual impact of the operation is by working behind "berms," small hillsides which hide the mining operation from view.

"Instead of mining full-face and open to view as done for a number of years, we are now constructing berms or lips which hide the mining from view. They also serve as noise buffers and hold natural vegetation which keeps the sand from blowing," Berger said.

In response to a complaint about ground vibrations, Berger pointed out that the company now uses rubber tired dozers (tractors) to cut down on the ground shaking on the Mount Hermon side of the property.

Berger is also proud of the 100 per cent water retention on the property. Ponds throughout the sand pits collect rain water and the water used the water is recycled or soaked back into the ground to wash the sand.

If the water were not retained, he explained, it would run down into Bean Creek and

the sand would build up in the waterways.

When washing down the entrance road, the company purposely plugs the county's drainage system so the sandy water doesn't get into the system, he added. The water instead flows into a sump.

Berger added that "to the best of my knowledge, erosion and run-off waters are under control." The EIR, however, warns that the final slopes planned by Kaiser may promote slides and suggests the slopes be left less steep than planned when the mining is completed.

Berger stated that the company tries to maintain the required 45 degree slopes and is trying to lower the profile of the hills so less of the area can be seen from surrounding areas.

Despite Kaiser's pride in its voluntary efforts to retain the aesthetics of the area, the company is currently faced with complying with a new county ordinance restricting quarry operations.

The company has taken issue on some of the planning departments suggestions on bringing Kaiser into compliance with the ordinance. This issue will be discussed in the final part of the series.

REFERENCE