

Gravel haul could be gold mine for river

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SAN ANDREAS -- A Calaveras River fishery restoration project designed to aid a threatened Central Valley species could get a boost from a seemingly unlikely source -- a Mother Lode mining operation.

A San Francisco group has received approval for a plan to remove nearly a half-million cubic yards of gravel from an old gold-dredging operation near Jenny Lind, and some of that material could be used to enhance salmon and steelhead spawning opportunities in the Calaveras River.

Calaveras County supervisors on Monday approved the new mining permit, which allows Sean Smith and Ralph Esquivel to remove about 2 million cubic yards of rock.

But a county planning department staff member said the property -- about a quarter-mile south of Jenny Lind, east of Milton Road and north of the Calaveras River -- contains closer to 450,000 cubic yards of material.

The project's potential traffic impacts generated opposition from some Jenny Lind residents when it went to the Planning Commission last month, but no one spoke in opposition when supervisors considered it Monday.

The Planning Department had estimated that hauling away 2 million cubic yards of material would have generated 100 new truck trips a day on Milton Road, Jenny Lind Road and Highway 26 over a seven-year period.

Robert Sellman, the county's acting planning director, said there would be fewer truck trips with less material to be removed.

Esquivel and Smith will pay the county an undetermined amount of money to soften the impacts to the structural integrity of those three roads. The fee will be based on the amount of material hauled.

However, if a local conservation group has its way, some of that gravel may not have to be hauled far.

John Raine, a Rancho Calaveras resident, said the Calaveras River Steering Committee is seeking grant funds to buy gravel from the Esquivel/Smith operation to create steelhead and salmon spawning areas in the Calaveras River. The committee is a partnership of four conservation groups in Amador, Calaveras and San Joaquin Counties.

Raine, a committee member, said his group has two specific areas in mind to dump gravel for fish habitat.

The first site, eyed for steelhead spawning, is a 300-yard stretch of the river just below New Hogan Dam. Raine said the group also wants to "re-carpet" another 300-yard stretch extending from the old Jenny Lind Bridge to about 100 yards downstream of the new Jenny Lind Bridge for salmon spawning.

Raine said the gravel is needed because over time the small rock has been washed out of the river below the dam, and the dam prevents new gravel from settling there.

In addition, river flows have washed away gravel near the town of Jenny Lind, leaving only larger rocks in the bottom of the river.

"Unless you replace the gravel that gets washed downstream," Raine said, "the fish have no place to spawn."

Raine said it would make sense for the group to obtain its gravel from the Esquivel/Smith operation because of its proximity and the fact that it is native Calaveras River gravel.

Smith said Raine's group would have "dibs" on the gravel it needs, providing it finds a grant to cover the material's cost.

Raine estimated it would cost about \$300,000 to complete the Calaveras fishery restoration project. He said that because the Central Valley steelhead is a rainbow trout that lives in saltwater, migrates to freshwater to reproduce and is a threatened species, his group's application should rank high when grant money becomes available. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is a potential funding source, Raine said.

Smith said earlier that his company has done other spawning habitat projects, including one on the Stanislaus River.

Raine said he didn't envision any work occurring on the restoration project for two to three years, because it could take that long to obtain money to buy the gravel.

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