

QUARRY

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awareness about the meeting and express concerns with the quarry and handed them out in Perry and to businesses in La Grande. He created a Facebook page, Stop the Robbs Hill Road Quarry, which as of Wednesday, March 3, had 52 followers. And Moyal started an online petition against the quarry on change.org. More than 530 people have signed the document so far.

Moyal said if the county gives the approval, the problems with the quarry will be here in the Grand Ronde Valley for a long time.

Depending on what part of the application you read, he said, the lifespan of the quarry is 89 years or 137 years and would extract 300 million tons of rock. Per the application, one gallon of diesel via rail can transport 1 ton of aggregate 440 miles, and the plan is to ship 2,000 tons a day every day of the year to Western states. Doing the math, he said, and being generous with doubling the distance, requires almost 1.47 million gallons of diesel a year.

“The carbon footprint is truly alarming,” Moyal said. “This is an immense amount of fuel being burned and an immense amount of carbon being emitted.”

That makes the quarry, he said, “a massive polluting project.”

Others also concerned

Raymond Myer of La Grande also is opposed to the project. He said as a child he played in the seasonal creeks that run through where the quarry would operate. He questioned the reasons behind the proposal.

“First off, there’s no need for it,” he said. “Second, environmentally it’s wrong. And third, it would be an eyesore.”

Union County and the surrounding areas have several rock quarries, he said, and Harney Rock



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

David Moyal of La Grande pauses Tuesday, March 2, 2021, outside Perry near the site of a proposed quarry. Moyal is leading the charge in opposition to the proposal.

& Paving Co. in North Powder already provides ballast to Union Pacific Railroad for the Pacific Northwest and other rock products to the local community.

The outdoors and fish and wildlife matter to residents here, Myer said. The site for the quarry helps support several hundred elk, and he said erosion from a quarry would raise concerns for endangered salmon spawn in the Grande Ronde River, which is adjacent to and downhill from the site.

“Here we go again, destroying their habitat,” Myer said.

Dust pollution from the site would blow down the canyon into La Grande, and the place would be noisy. And like Moyal, he said a quarry operation of this scope could knock the “scenic” right out of the scenic corridor.

“Is it still (scenic)? If so, how can this rock quarry be turned

into the scar on the hillside next to I-84?” he said.

Myer said he sees another problem with the location.

Robbs Hill Road is a narrow, poorly maintained, steep road with a creek running next to it down to the Grande Ronde River, he said, and homeowners and recreational users depend on the road for access to Perry when Interstate 84 is closed. A big operation right off the road will not make that situation better.

Dan Steele said he lives in Perry and also does not want the quarry to go in. A retired railroad worker, he said he spent a long time around the Harney rock pit, and big quarries mean heavy equipment and inevitable breakdowns that lead to diesel spills and more. All of those fluids, he said, would end up in the Grande Ronde River.

“There’s just a lot of things wrong with the whole thing,” he said, including possible deprecia-

tion of property values. Steele also joined the chorus in questioning the placement of the project.

The Harney pit for example, he said, is far from any scenic area and homes. Steele said his home, where his grandchildren often visit, would be half a mile from the Robbs Hill Road pit.

“There’s got to be a million places more appropriate for such a quarry,” Steele said.

Preparing for the longer fight

Moyal said he has put together about 35 pages of specific objections for the county planning commission to consider at the Monday meeting. The real purpose of gathering all the details he can, he said, is to be ready with an appeal to the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals, the tribunal that serves as the arbiter of local land use decisions in the state.

CANYON

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conditions,” said Jim Zacharias, a member of the Wallowa Resources Board of Directors.

Schmidt said those conditions require 6 inches of frost or 12 inches of snow on the ground for logging equipment to operate on.

Making the forest safer

The approximately 2,110 acres of timberland along 11 miles of the Lostine River is being thinned of hazard trees and underbrush to make the area safer for recreationists and residents of the Lostine Canyon. The hazard trees appear the greatest threat to public safety, the experts said Thursday during an interview in the canyon.

“The Forest Service spends an abundance of time and effort trying to keep this corridor open safely to the public,” said Mark Moeller, U.S. Forest Service assistant fire management officer. “That consists primarily of falling hazard trees that present a danger to the public.”

A decision memo by the Forest Service dated in 2017 included photographs of those hazard trees that had fallen on tables in campgrounds and across roads, backing up the Forest Service claim of the necessity of their removal.

In addition to tree removal, the project also includes installing a helicopter pad, re-decking the bridge at Lake Creek and removing slash leftover from the logging work. Some of the slash will be burned, while some will be masticated — ground into mulch for the forest floor. Some slash will be left for use by campers as firewood.

“The purpose of this



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

“It’s going to look like a park,” said Jim Zacharias, after viewing a section of the Lostine Corridor Public Safety Project, that had been cleared of dense timber and underbrush Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021.

project is to reduce the risk of these forest stands in the corridor to future insect and disease impacts (such as falling trees), which, in turn, reduces the risk to the people who use this corridor, the improvements in the corridor to private land and the resource in the canyon including the riverfront,” said Matt Howard, of the Oregon Department of Forestry’s Wallowa Unit.

Timber harvest also matters

In addition to public safety, the timber harvest portion of the stewardship contract is seen as a benefit both for safety against wildfires and economically.

Moeller estimated there would be a total of 4 million board feet of timber harvested. Pro Thinning Inc., operated by Zacharias’ sons Tom and Seth Zacharias, has been contracted to do the harvesting.

“This number is a ‘total,’ and lumber is only one of numerous forest products that may be produced out of this total,” Moeller said.

The smaller logs are going to Schmidt’s IBR mill in Wallowa, while larger “saw

logs” will be sold on the open market. Schmidt said some are going to Jim Zacharias’ Jay Zee Lumber in Joseph, some to the Boise-Cascade mill in Elgin, some to Woodgrain in La Grande and some to Idaho Forest in Lewiston, Idaho.

Nils D. Christoffersen, executive director of Wallowa Resources, said the project has been sought for more than 15 years.

“When I chaired the county’s first community wildfire protection plan processes back in 2005-06, this area was one of four areas that emerged as the highest priorities based on the risk of fire, and the potential consequence that a wildfire would have on people’s lives, our community and a wide range of environmental values at risk,” Christoffersen wrote in an email. “That risk assessment, and the potential consequences in the Lostine Corridor, have not changed — if anything they have risen. If a fire broke out in the corridor last summer, when the parking lots were filled beyond capacity (from recreationists) and hundreds of additional cars were parked along the side of the road, it

could have been catastrophic. Evacuation routes would have been clogged, and access by firefighting crews blocked.”

Howard, of the ODF, agreed. Earlier he noted that it’s not “if” wildfire comes to the area, but “when.”

“We’re a fire-dependent ecosystem; we have wildland fires in this county every year. The Lostine Corridor is not free from that,” he said, noting that “fire-dependent” means fire helps maintain forest health.

“As long as summer thunderstorms keep rolling through, we’re going to have fires, and fire’s a normal part of the ecosystem,” he said. “When we say ‘fire-dependent,’ we mean our forests depend on that as part of their normal cycle.”

Project sparked controversy

But neither recreationists nor landowners want to see a wildfire get out of control.

In a *Chieftain* story from February 2020, Michael Eng, of the Lostine Firewise Community, said approximately 110 properties with 120 structures make up about 15

square miles, or 9,600 acres, south of Lostine. About 45 landowners are participants in that Firewise Community.

“Fire is good for the ecosystem but when you put ‘catastrophic’ in front of it, that’s a whole new formula,” Howard said.

But the project hasn’t been without controversy. Earlier in the process, two environmental groups — Oregon Wild and the Greater Hells Canyon Council — went to court to stop it because they said they objected to some of the aspects of the then-proposed project and to some procedural concerns.

Rob Klavins, Northeast Oregon field coordinator for Oregon Wild out of Enterprise, said the environmental groups — and some area residents who opposed the project — were in favor of the aspects involving removing hazard trees, adding natural firebreaks, the helipad and thinning around structures. But portions appeared to be going too far.

“Concerned about a majority who seemed more about getting logs to mills than safety concerns,” Klavins said last week.

He said the procedural concerns involved including “really important stakeholders, ourselves included,” in the decision-making process that he believed were overlooked.

As a result, the groups took their objections to court, ultimately seeing an unfavorable decision in the 9th U.S. Court of Appeals.

Klavins called the project “a dramatic overreach from their stated purpose.”

He also said his group only went to court reluctantly.

“If they had done this properly, there were lots of portions of the project we could’ve supported,” he said.

Klavins said after they took it to court, the Forest Service scaled back the

HOW TO PARTICIPATE IN THE HEARING

• The Union County Planning Commission is holding a public hearing Monday, March 8, at 7 p.m. via teleconference to consider approving the application for a large quarry at the juncture of Robbs Hill Road and Interstate 84 near Perry. To listen to or participate in the hearing, call 253-215-8782 or 669-900-6833 and enter meeting identification No. 995 6180 8582.

To even have a chance to argue before LUBA, Moyal said, “You really have to cross the t’s and dots the i’s.”

The application states the quarry would create five to seven full-time jobs. Moyal argued the quarry also would cost Union County jobs.

The LUBA application would place 4,550 acres into a conservation easement with the Mule Deer Foundation to protect habitat for mule deer and elk. According to the application, the easement would allow cattle grazing and timber management.

Moyal called the easement a way to make the quarry more palatable for the county planning commission.

The meeting Monday will be a public hearing, with the applicant getting to present arguments for the quarry, and then public comments for and against. Often, planning commissions limit the time for public comment. Moyal said the last time he spoke against this, he got three minutes.

But he said he is asking the commission to allow him more time to go through the numerous objections he has collected against the project. Whether the commission chair will give him enough time, he said, he does not know.

If the planning commission gives its stamp of approval to the project, Moyal said he is ready to step up his opposition with more community organizing and even fundraising to pay for a lawyer to take up the fight.

project. He said he plans to go up there this week to see what changes were made.

Project remains multifaceted

“Everything we’re doing here on the federal side, it fits to a ‘T’ into our community wildfire protection plan . . . the common pieces are fitting together,” Moeller said. “The primary goal of this project is public safety. Preventing catastrophic wildfire is a piece of that, but that’s not the sole purpose of this project.”

Schmidt agreed that the hazard trees remain the most constant danger. He and his family often recreate in the area and told of a time last summer when high winds added to the danger.

“It was scary as hell; trees were falling all around us,” he said, adding that a woman packing stuff out on her horse was four hours behind because she had to cut trees that fell across the trail.

Jim Zacharias, in his capacity with Wallowa Resources, spoke highly of how the project fits into that group’s mission.

“Wallowa Resources is really community oriented. We really support what this is designed to do,” he said. “Plus, it’s supporting the local economy in creating jobs. Wallowa Resources is about the human resource, too. With Pro Thinning, there are five people directly on their crew, plus a half-dozen truck drivers who are hauling the logs and David (Schmidt)’s operation that has 30-something employees. When there’s a trickle effect: They’re all eating at M.Crow store and buying Copenhagen at the Little Store.”

Zacharias was pleased with the results he saw in areas that had been completed.

“It’s going to look like a park,” he said.

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