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Subject: Highway 33 Gravel Truck Update
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HIGHWAY 33 GRAVEL TRUCK UPDATE

April 26, 2007

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And now the details...

1. Victory! Ventura County Reverses Course, Decides to Prepare Full EIR for Ozena Mine

In a stunning victory today, the Ventura County Planning Department announced that it has decided to prepare a full Environmental Impact Report before approving the Ozena Mine. This move sets the project back several months, and means that the public hearing scheduled for May has been postponed – quite possibly for several months or years.

The Ozena Mine was permitted to send as many as 100 truck trips per day along Scenic Highway 33. Last year, the permit for the mine expired, and the mine operator submitted an application to Ventura County to double the number of trucks and to continue mining there for another five years.

But before Ventura County could approve the expansion, it first had to conduct environmental studies required by the California Environmental Quality Act. These studies were of the utmost importance, analyzing the effects of mining on air quality, groundwater supplies, rare plants and animals, and quality of life. However, instead of analyzing these impacts in a full Environmental Impact Report (EIR), the County instead decided to prepare a less-detailed Negative Declaration.

The County's draft Negative Declaration concluded – with little supporting evidence – that the mine expansion would not cause any significant impacts. Several agencies and organizations, including Los Padres ForestWatch, the Ojai Valley Municipal Advisory Council, Concerned Residents of Lockwood Valley, Concerned Cuyama Valley Citizens, Cuyama Unified School District, California Department of Fish and Game, City of Ojai, County of Santa Barbara, and the Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District, along with many residents, wrote letters to the County identifying deficiencies in the report and requesting a full EIR.

Today, we received word that the County has agreed to scrap the Negative Declaration and prepare a full EIR! This will have the immediate effect of postponing any mine expansion until at least next year. Most importantly, it will ensure that the County improves its environmental study, and will give local residents additional opportunities to voice their concerns.

The County had planned a public hearing next month before the Ventura County Planning Commission. At this hearing, the commission could have approved the expansion of the Ozena mine. ForestWatch and other groups have spent the last several months collecting information and conducting our own investigation into the matter, and we were prepared to appeal any Planning Commission approval that relied on a faulty environmental report.

We're hopeful that the County will use this opportunity to better protect our forest and towns from excessive truck traffic. Thanks to everyone who wrote letters and worked behind the scenes on this issue – your voices were heard loud and clear!

2. Mark Your Calendars - Public Hearing for Diamond Rock Mine Scheduled for May 30 in Santa Maria

Despite today's victory, our work on this issue is far from over. The proposed Diamond Rock Sand and Gravel Mine and Processing Facility could be approved by the Santa Barbara Planning Commission on Wednesday, May 30, at a public hearing in Santa Maria. The hearing will begin promptly at 9:00am.

Several buses and carpools will depart Ojai and the Cuyama Valley. Even though the location of this hearing is inconvenient for many of us, it's extremely important that we pack the hearing room! We need to send a message loud and clear that we won't stand for excessive truck traffic through our forest and towns. Stay tuned for more details as the day gets closer.

The Diamond Rock mine is slated for several miles downstream of the Ozena Mine, and would add as many as 138 truck trips per day through our forest and towns during peak production. The proposed mining site is located in Santa Barbara County, just over the Ventura County line.

Santa Barbara County prepared a draft EIR for the Diamond Rock mine, and in January, more than 300 concerned citizens wrote letters to the County voicing their concerns about excessive truck traffic on Highway 33. The final EIR is scheduled to be released to the public sometime during the next few days.

3. CalTrans Agrees to Conduct Safety Study of Highway 33

Many of us have experienced firsthand the safety issues involved with gravel trucks on Scenic Highway 33, or know someone who has. This narrow, two-lane winding mountain road seems unsuitable as an industrial haul route supporting hundreds of trucks per day. Several accidents involving gravel trucks have occurred along this highway in recent months.

CalTrans – the California Department of Transportation – has jurisdiction over this state highway. Earlier this year, County Supervisor Steve Bennett sent a formal request to CalTrans, asking the agency to conduct the safety and engineering study of Scenic Highway 33 to determine its suitability as a haul route.

In response to Supervisor Bennett's request, CalTrans agreed to perform the study, and expects to release the results of that study in the coming weeks. ForestWatch is busy collecting information and conducting our own investigation to ensure that the CalTrans study concludes what we already know from experience – that Scenic Highway 33 is neither suitable nor safe as an industrial trucking route.

4. Community Rally Planned for Ojai in May

The Stop the Trucks Coalition is organizing a community rally in Ojai for Tuesday, May 15 at Chaparral Auditorium at 7:00pm. A similar meeting was organized in January and attended by more than 130 concerned residents. Come learn more about what we're doing to reduce excessive truck traffic and how you can help. Save the date! More details to follow soon.

You're receiving this email because you attended the January 30 town meeting, wrote a letter to the County, or have provided your email address to us. If you would not like to receive future email updates, reply to this email with the words "remove trucks" in the subject line. If you received a forwarded version of this email and would like to receive future alerts directly from us, send an email to action@LPFW.org with the words "subscribe trucks" in the subject line. Los Padres ForestWatch is a community-based nonprofit organization working to protect and restore the local Los Padres National Forest. ForestWatch, PO Box 831, Santa Barbara, CA 93102 805.617.4610