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Damaging Russian River Gravel Mining Plan Challenged

Environmental, fish conservation groups warn massive gravel removal will harm river and wildlife

Healdsburg, CA – After exhausting all other remedies, Russian Riverkeeper (Riverkeeper) and the Redwood Empire Chapter of Trout Unlimited (RETU) filed a lawsuit today challenging the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors' December 7, 2010 approval of a massive gravel mining operation called the Syar Alexander Valley Instream Mining Project.

Despite the identification of an environmentally superior alternative in the project's environmental impact report that would still meet most project objectives, the county elected to approve the withdrawal of up to 350,000 tons of gravel from the Russian River every year for a period of 15 years. The mining will take place on a 6.5-mile stretch of river located in the lower Alexander Valley near the town of Geyserville. The Syar Project is the first mining project of significance in the lower Alexander Valley in over 10 years.

“This approval fast-tracks the mining of gravel at a rate beyond what nature can replenish. That's an approach providing a short-term gain for one business at the long-term expense of protecting kids and elderly residents from increased air pollution, downstream property owners from bank erosion, and economically important salmon and steelhead that have been prized by generations of anglers,” said Don McEnhill, Executive Director, Russian Riverkeeper. The county's own gravel monitoring report from 2009 concluded that the river can only naturally replenish about 181,000 tons of gravel per year but Syar seeks to mine up to 350,000 tons of gravel annually.

Riverkeeper and RETU participated in the administrative proceedings leading up to the county's approval. Both organizations have invested years of effort and expense working on behalf of the Russian River, those that enjoy it, and the fish that rely on a healthy river, often collaborating with landowners, water users, and businesses throughout the area. Regrettably, litigation challenging the county's approval of the gravel mine was the only option left to ensure that adverse impacts to endangered salmon and steelhead, downstream property values, and the river's ecology are adequately analyzed, understood, and mitigated.

As recently as the 1960s, when many of us were kids, tens of thousands of salmon and steelhead returned each year to the river right here in our backyards. The Russian River was once a world-famous fishing river and anglers came from around the globe to match wits with our salmon and steelhead. But today, precious little habitat remains for these fish, and they are on the brink of extinction. Impacts from instream gravel mining to salmon and steelhead are well-documented.

“Our kids and grandkids should be able to have the experience of finding, and maybe even catching, native California trout, salmon, and steelhead in their historic range. That is our vision, and it is the reason why we joined this lawsuit,” said, Dr. Julie Carlson, President of the Redwood Empire Chapter of Trout Unlimited. “Despite the odds, these hardy fish persist, but only when and where we give them a chance—it is disheartening to have to take legal actions, but we have no choice,” said Carlson.

“Our goal is to see a sustainable project that truly addresses all impacts and not the old boom and bust gravel mining projects that take too much gravel from our river and then shut down for years after harming the river while not offering stable employment,” said McEnhill.

Earthjustice is providing legal representation for Riverkeeper and the Redwood Empire Chapter of Trout Unlimited on the Syar EIR lawsuit. Earthjustice is a non-profit public interest law firm dedicated to protecting the magnificent places, natural resources, and wildlife of this earth, and to defending the right of all people to a healthy environment.

Earthjustice attorney Greg Loarie said, “The Russian River is one of northern California’s jewels. People from all over the greater bay area and beyond know what a river is because of the Russian. We want to protect the river, the wild fish and the other wildlife that make it so special. If there’s surplus gravel that can be taken from the river without harming it then let’s figure that out but it’s clear that this mining plan is way too big for the size of this river.”

Redwood Empire Chapter of Trout Unlimited is the local Sonoma County chapter of Trout Unlimited, the nation’s leading and oldest coldwater fisheries conservation organization. The Redwood Empire Chapter has been instrumental in numerous aspects of salmon and steelhead recovery in the Russian River and its tributaries, including community outreach and youth education, habitat restoration, instream flow management, fish passage at Healdsburg Dam, and a long-standing presence in instream gravel mining issues.

Russian Riverkeeper is a Healdsburg based member of the International Waterkeeper Alliance with the mission to work with the community to advocate, educate and uphold our environmental laws to ensure the protection and restoration of the Russian River for the health and benefit of all who use and enjoy it. Riverkeeper and its predecessor Friends of the Russian River have been working since 1993 to eliminate adverse impacts from instream and open pit gravel mining in and along the Russian River.