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EPA: Deny 9 rock mining permits in Miami-Dade

By CURTIS MORGAN
cmorgan@MiamiHerald.com

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has waded in against the rock mining industry's plans to expand into 6,800 acres of wetlands bordering Everglades National Park and Miami-Dade County's biggest source of drinking water.

The EPA, in a letter sent last week to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, recommends denying nine requests for new mining permits, saying the rock pits would destroy wildlife habitat, drain water from adjacent Everglades marshes and potentially degrade water quality in a swath of Northwest Miami-Dade that the industry has dubbed the Lake Belt.

The letter echoes concerns raised by Senior U.S. District Judge William Hoeweler, who in February reinstated an earlier overturned order that halted mining in hundreds of acres surrounding a well field that supplies more than 1 million people.

Davina Marraccini, an EPA spokeswoman in Atlanta, stressed the agency "is not proposing to halt rock mining in the Lake Belt." The EPA, in fact, states that it wants to work with miners and the Corps to "enable continued mining while protecting South Florida's environment."

CHANGING PLANS

Still, the letter and a new environmental impact analysis from the Corps signals that mining companies may have to scale back, or at least tweak, plans to turn some 20,000 acres of West Miami-Dade into a chain of massive 80-foot-deep rock pits.

The Corps' study, which Hoeweler had ordered revised, lays out nine alternatives for mining, including several that would create 1,500-foot "exclusion zones" to protect a strip of wetlands intended to serve as buffer between the Everglades and urban pollution.

The EPA, in its letter, supports that proposal. It also questions plans to control seepage from the Everglades into the quarries and whether miners can adequately offset so much excavation. Under federal "mitigation" rules, developers can compensate for destroying wetlands by restoring similar habitat elsewhere but the letter notes there aren't enough mitigation areas left in Miami-Dade to make up for the loss.

Marraccini and Leah Oberlin, the Corps project manager for the Lake Belt, both called the letter routine, but it does serve formal notice for the Corps to consult with the EPA on the mining permits.

Oberlin said the two federal agencies were already discussing the Lake Belt on a weekly basis.

"We have pretty much all the concerns EPA has represented in their letter," she said. "We are working with them to make sure we resolve these as much as possible."

CAN BE RESOLVED

Kerri Barsh, an attorney for the Miami-Dade Limestone Products Association, a coalition of mining companies, said she was confident the agencies' environmental concerns could be resolved.

"Although not insurmountable, we are sensitive to the issues raised by the EPA and are committed to developing a mining plan that can be supported by all the permitting agencies," she said.

The industry also has appealed Hoeveler's partial mining ban decision to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, which overturned his initial 2008 order to rescind a first phase of mining the Corps approved in 2000. Oral arguments are scheduled in October.

Brad Sewell, an attorney with the National Resources Defense Council, one of three environmental groups that sued the Corps in 2002 over the initial Lake Belt permits, said the letter could prove significant.

In 2000, the last time the EPA recommended denial, the Corps slashed miners' requests from 14,300 acres over 50 years to 5,400 acres over 10 years. The new permit request would extend mining to another 6,800 acres

"It's definitely more than protocol and is consistent with what EPA did before," Sewell said.

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