Laura Lundquist

Arlee residents battling a proposed gravel pit have scored one more victory in their relentless campaign to get answers. An environmental assessment. But, the assessment’s conclusions don’t go in their favor.

On Wednesday, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality published an environmental assessment for the 160-acre Marvin Rehbein gravel pit and asphalt plant proposed northeast of Arlee on the Flathead Reservation.

The assessment found no criteria that would keep the gravel pit from becoming operational.

DEQ determined that the gravel pit wouldn’t affect surface or ground water quality or quantity, even though residents have expressed concern about it leaking into water bodies. Pit operators also anticipate that air quality may be somewhat affected by dust from the pit and air pollutants from the asphalt facility but considers the effects short-term and negligible, although the operator would also need to obtain an air quality permit.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program lists 20 species of concern in the vicinity, including three that may be listed as threatened or endangered..DEQ determined that the gravel pit wouldn’t affect any of these species.

DEQ also noted that the pit and asphalt plant would affect the environment. Many residents of Arlee are frustrated when it led nowhere.

For many communities, the Jocko and Kootenai have reached out to the Lake County commissioners and other communities trying to get the DEQ to accept permits, and the time allowed for DEQ to adequately assess the application’s claims was cut drastically.

With the passage of House Bill 599, sponsored by Rep. Steve Gunderson, R-Libby, many other Montana communities get anymore: an environmental assessment. But, the process of getting that study done and in front of the DEQ.

“The first red flag for residents was that several weren’t notified of the proposal, learning of the pit only through the grapevine. The second flag was learning that DEQ would hold a public hearing only if more than half of the residents within a half-mile requested a hearing within 30 days of the initial notification. Residents live within a 2-mile radius but the DEQ doesn’t consider them to be a nearby residence.

In mid-June, Arlee residents learned that Montana-based Riverside Contracting, Inc., had applied for a 200-acre permit to plant 110 species of trees, including the threatened Jarrah, and a 24-hour asphalt plant. In the meantime, Friends of the Jocko would definitely be commenting.

The only reason the gravel pit hasn’t opened yet is because DEQ had flagged some deficiencies in the application that weren’t resolved until Dec. 6. In the meantime, Friends of the Jocko would definitely be commenting.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe has voiced its concern about how the proposed northeast gravel pit and 24-hour asphalt plant would affect their residents. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe has asked the DEQ to hold a public hearing, saying that it has now had a public hearing.

Knoetgen had yet to read the assessment but said the Friends of the Jocko would definitely be commenting.

Knutson couldn’t testify about their concerns, which are many, from worries about groundwater to constant light and noise pollution from the asphalt plant to high levels of truck traffic on Arlee’s dirt roads that would last until 2047.

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