

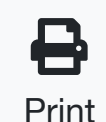
DEQ issues permit for controversial Arlee gravel pit

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According to a press release, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has issued an opencut mining permit for a controversial gravel pit northeast of Arlee, just off of White Coyote Road. The 157.1-acre site is located on private property near the Garden of One Thousand Buddhas and will be mined by Riverside Contracting of Missoula.

According to Monday's press release, "The operator has met state opencut mining law requirements and has posted the corresponding reclamation bond as necessary to be issued an opencut mining permit by DEQ."

The department accepted public comments on the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) during a 30-day public comment period, which the department describes as "a unique circumstance for this site since it was re-permitted after the original permit expired." The re-permitting process allowed for a longer public comment and review window than is typically provided for under the Opencut Mining Act.

The proposal drew considerable opposition from residents of the Jocko Valley, including the Garden of Once Thousand Buddhas, located just a half mile from the site.

In a letter to the DEQ, the garden's president, Khenpo Namchak, expressed concerns that "between truck traffic, noise from the breaking of rocks, and constant vibration from the mining practices that will be the daily norm at the proposed gravel mine and asphalt plant, students and visitors alike will find it impossible to practice, rest, relax, and take teaching without disruption."

The non-profit group Friends of the Jocko also protested the development, arguing that the large-scale gravel pit could diminish property values, cause noise and air pollution, disrupt wildlife, including elk, wolves and black bears, and possibly disturb cultural resources and a historical waterway.

The EA acknowledges "minor impacts to air quality, including odor, could be expected due to an asphalt facility emitting a limited amount of air pollutants, but suggests those impacts can be mitigated "by the revegetation of soil stockpiles and the use of water to control dust emanating from mined areas." It concludes, "any impacts to the air would be short-term and would be negligible."

As to disruption of wildlife, the EA notes that the while the mine "could temporarily displace some individual members of species during operation of the proposed project ... any displaced animals could find other suitable habitat nearby and return to the project area shortly after the project conclusion."

It also estimates that the project will create "moderate noise impacts" for nearby residents and visitors to the Buddha Garden, as well as "moderate impacts" to aesthetics "through the life of the permit."

The permit allows Riverside to mine gravel to a depth of 12 feet and operate around the clock "to meet demand or project-specific requirements," although artificial lighting must conform to OSHA or Mine Safety and Health Administration standards.

The asphalt plant will be located in the northwest corner of the site, with mining slated to begin in the northeast corner of the 39.3 acres that are currently bonded. Development of the remaining 117.8 non-bonded acres would require additional DEQ approval.

In addition to the asphalt plant and gravel pit, the site will include a pug mill, conveyor and crushing equipment. The permit allows Riverside to remove an estimated one-million cubic yards of material from the site between now and the final reclamation date of December 2047, when it must be restored to "cropland, rangeland or pasture."

The site was originally permitted for a gravel pit in 2001 but wasn't excavated before the permit expired in 2010. It's taken nearly a year for Riverside to receive its second DEQ approval for the project. The initial application, submitted last April, was found to be deficient, in part because landscape features such as Pellew Creek were missing from the application.

The company filed an amended application on Sept. 21 and received a second letter of deficiency on Nov. 2, noting that the application failed to mention wildlife in the area and didn't address irrigation ditches and associated easements along the perimeter of the proposed mine.

In the approved permit, checkboxes acknowledge the presence of a variety of birds and wildlife, while another section details attempts the company made to contact the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project about a ditch near the permitted area, to no avail. The application states that Riverside "will maintain a 50-set back from the irrigation canal to provide any required access to the ditch for maintenance and repairs."

As to the presence of a creek, according to the EA, "There is no evidence that Pellew Creek currently conveys surface water through the site."

The permit and the Environmental Assessment may be viewed online at: searchopencutpermits.mt.gov/; type 3415 into the 'opencut #' field.

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