

DUST UP

Carp Lake residents oppose
proposed 10th gravel mine



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million

PNR 4-6-22

Tess Ware The Petoskey News-Review | USA TODAY NETWORK

CARP LAKE TOWNSHIP – A permit request for a sand and gravel mine has been filed in Carp Lake Township adjacent to Paradise Lake along U.S. 31.

The company proposing the mine is Rieth Riley, a construction company based in Goshen, Indiana. This would be the 10th operating gravel mine within a one and one half mile residential area, according to Carp Lake Township Supervisor Paul Teike. The mines are owned by different companies and two are owned by Emmet County.

According to Mike Wilczynski, a retired geologist who volunteers with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, sand and gravel mines are regulated by townships and not states like other forms of mining. This often leads to mines getting approved with little investigation and facing little regulation.

“This is a complicated process and it’s left to the locals in Michigan and everywhere else,” Wilczynski said. “All other mining is regulated

at the state level. In fact, the federal (government) even gets involved in coal mining. But sand and gravel escape because it’s always been a mom-and-pop industry. But over the last 30 years, we’ve grown into 400 acres, 700 acre super mines and they aren’t regulated by the state.”

Wilczynski added that local townships often don’t have the knowledge to approve or deny these proposals and don’t have the knowledge or resources to regulate them.

Wilczynski said the biggest complaints when it comes to gravel mines are dust, noise and traffic.

Large trucks transport sand and gravel multiple times per day during hours of operation, which, for the Rieth Riley proposed mine would be 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Crushers and other on-site machinery cause noise as they dig and crush rock.

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The markers with the orange ties mark where Rieth Riley’s proposed mine site begins. The markers sit on the edge of Angela Russ’ property in Carp Lake Township. In the background is the Russ barn. PROVIDED BY ANGELA RUSS

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"I know what it's like to have that background noise and when you live in a city, you might hear sirens or horn honking or different movement of cars. This is a constant crushing, crushing however many tons of gravel and it's so noisy and I live in the woods and you can just hear it reverb down the whole road for a few miles. So I wonder what another noise will be like in this community," said Aliana Knapp-Prasek, who lives in Carp Lake. Knapp-Prasek will be around two miles from the proposed site.

The dust created by the mines is called silica dust. Silica is a common rock-forming mineral found in sand and gravel mines. The mines dig up the fine particles, which can become airborne if proper precautions are not taken.

Fine silica particles are able to get into the lungs and eventually lead to illness. In a healthy person, symptoms like coughing and shortness of breath can take 10 years to show up. Lung disorders like COPD may be preliminary to silicosis, according to Denise Trabbic-Pointer, volunteer toxics and remediation specialist for the Sierra Club Michigan Chapter. Employees in gravel mines are required to wear respirators in order to protect themselves from breathing in the dust. The majority of the information known about silica dust comes from research done on the industry and occupational hazards.

"There's actually quite a bit of data about people that work with (silica) and people in mining and things like that, being impacted by it," Trabbic-Pointer said. "But there's not a lot of information about non-occupational exposures. So these people that have to live around it. There's some, but there's not a lot. There's actually not even really good regulation of it by the (Environmental Protection Agency) or the state air quality standards."

According to Trabbic-Pointer, people who live near these mines often complain about dust building up on their homes and, in summer months, even getting inside their homes.

In order to determine if there are unsafe levels of silica dust coming from a site, Trabbic-Pointer said the Air Quality Division uses an opacity test. Someone trained to do opacity readings goes

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Mike Wilczynski Retired geologist

to the site and visually rates the dust by the percentage of what they can see through. Anything over 20 percent opacity is considered non-compliance.

"I don't open any of my windows all summer long because between the pit over across the street and the one right next door, no matter which way the wind is blowing, my house is full of dust," said Carp Lake resident Joanna Reed. "And it's dirty dust, not just light dust. Basically, I don't want to tell people what to do with their property or not do with their property, but when you can't sit outside your own yard because of the noise and the dust, it's sad."

When Carp Lake residents heard a new mine was being proposed, many went to the township and county meetings to express their thoughts on the proposal.

"For years, we have called down to (Emmet County) about (mine operations) starting before they're allowed to start, trucks going by our house at 5:30 in the morning, going too fast. And nothing gets done on the county level to reprimand the other (mines) down the road from us," Carp Lake Township resident Angel Russ said. "And so we're really concerned about this one because if the county isn't making the other ones behave well, what's stopping this one in my backyard from (mis)behaving?"

Multiple residents complained that the trucks going to and from the active mines drive over the 55 mph speed limit, despite driving through a residential area.

Another concern among residents is the potential impacts to well water. Reed said in 2013, one of the sites near her house started digging more frequently and that afterward, her drinking and bathing water began to smell. Reed bought filters, but said her water has never been the same.

Reed's water has not been tested, so it is not known if the water is contaminated and no damage can be traced back to the mines.

One of Wilczynski's concerns about the Rieth Riley proposal is the company's promise to stay above the groundwater. He said the company didn't do any drilling or exploration to determine

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where the water table is and whether or not there is even gravel in the area.

"They said they're going to stay above the water table even though we don't know where it is," he said. "How do you know if you're going to make money if you don't know where the water table is? How do you know if you're going to make money if that's not all sand and gravel in that bank? What happens if you have a clay core, and there's nothing there? I've seen that happen. They didn't do any drilling and exploration that I've seen. So I questioned the value of the mine. They can't demonstrate there's any value at this point."

In addition to their other concerns, residents are worried about their property values going down. Rieth Riley assured them at a county meeting in February that the operation would not impact their property values, but the residents continue to be skeptical.

Wilczynski pointed to a study conducted by the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in 2006 and an analysis submitted by the Healthy Waters Alliance in Hope Township in 2021 that both concluded sand and gravel mines decrease the value of surrounding properties.

Also involved in the mine proposal is Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, who provided comments on the proposal in January and again in February.

The comments in January stated what the council believes Rieth Riley needs to do before the project can get approved. This includes:

- Identifying the depth of the water table. Due to the wetlands on-site, the water table may be high and excavation could expose it to contamination.
- The company provides a map of surface waters in the area; including lakes, ponds, streams and creeks.
- Rieth Riley should update its plans based on the wetland mapping and include "intended wetland setbacks." Also, if a wetland permit is required from EGLE, the council recommended the township delay approval until the state wetland permit is granted.
- The application did not include information on where equipment and ve-

nicles will be stored. The council recommended the application include information on where vehicles will be cleaned and how the company plans to control runoff. Also to be included is plans for controlling invasive species introduced through equipment.

- The company should expand its plans for controlling stormwater on-site, both during and after mining is complete. This would include a stormwater management plan projecting impacts to topography and measures to control stormwater runoff.

- Expand on the intended measures for the control of fugitive (silica) dust, so potential effectiveness of the measures can be assessed.

In February, the council added that it should be requested that Rieth Riley pay for the testing of wells within a quarter mile radius of the site before, during and after operations to ensure water quality throughout the process.

"The watershed council often reviews site plans and permit applications at the local, state and federal level," said Kacey Cook, policy specialist and staff attorney for the council. "And, of course, it's the planning commission that is the decision maker for this case. Our role is to provide information and resources and recommendations to ensure that we're exploring all the potential environmental impacts, especially as it pertains to water and that project plans minimize impacts to the water resources as much as possible. So we will continue to participate in the public process."

Teike said the township did not recommend the permit be approved, but provided restrictions they would like to see implemented regarding hours of operation.

At 7 p.m. on Thursday, April 7, the Emmet County Planning Commission meeting will be held in the Board of Commissioners' meeting room on the first floor of the Emmet County Building, 200 Division St. in Petoskey. The Rieth Riley gravel mine will be discussed at the meeting and representatives from the company will be present to submit the updated application. Tip of the Mitt will be in attendance, as well as several Carp Lake residents living near the proposed mine site.

The agenda for the meeting can be found on the county website.

Rieth Riley did not respond to a request for comment by the time of publication.