

Court rules for quarry firm

By Hillary S. Meeks
Staff writer

A rock quarry business won a court victory Friday after 21 years of battling for a surface-mining permit.

The permit, which will allow Kaweah River Rock Company to expand its operation in the Woodlake area, has been fought by a group called Valley Citizens for Water.

Members live near the targeted site and are concerned the project will affect area groundwater.

"We're a little bit disappointed in the ruling, however, it was up to the judge," said Julie Bigham, representative for Valley Citizens for Water.

Bigham said she does not know whether the group will appeal.

The project's opponents challenged the company in court by claiming it was not in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act. Tulare County Superior Court Judge Paul Vortmann ruled in favor of Valley Citizens for Water on several issues.

But Tulare County Superior Court Judge Melinda Reed ruled Friday that changes the company made in its environmental plan put it in compliance with the law.

Reed's ruling means Kaweah River Rock may go ahead with its expansion.

"We start immediately working on final plan designs and to start construction," said Dave Harrald, general manager of the company.

The company already has constructed an access road at State Route 245, he said.

Harrald said Kaweah River Rock has supplied Tulare County with a third of its sand and gravel since 1966. Without this contribution,

he said, the other two quarries in the county would not be able to support the demand.

He also said the project is designed to protect groundwater and is supported by the Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District.

"Engineers who are in the water business in Tulare County are satisfied that the project is well designed," he said.

Bigham said residents are still concerned that mining in their aquifer will affect groundwater supply, despite the company's assurances. They advocate hard-rock mining, which involves crushing rock into gravel.

"Valley Citizens for Water knows there's a need for cement," she said. "We're not radical environmentalists."

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