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Marin dairy ranchers worried over Lawson sand

By Jim Welte, IJ reporter

Permit for resource won't be renewed

Dairy ranchers in Marin and Sonoma counties who use sand as bedding for their cows must find an alternative substance, and they've turned to local officials and farm bureaus for help, both to educate them about alternatives and to come up with a plan to ease the transition.

Sand has long been used as a comfortable, dry bedding for the sensitive underbellies of dairy cows. Dairy ranchers in Marin and Sonoma have purchased sand from Lawson's Landing at Dillon Beach since the 1960s.

But faced with vocal environmental opposition to their ability to mine and sell the soft, fine sand from their Dillon Beach quarry, the Lawson family has decided not to renew its permit to do so once it has excavated the maximum allowable amount of sand from the site.

That means dairy ranchers using Lawson's sand must switch to an alternative once the permit expires, and many of them are not looking forward to the transition. County officials estimate 80 of the 100 ranchers in Marin and Sonoma use sand as bedding for bovine stalls.

"Believe me, sand is by far the best bedding for many reasons, including cost," said Sharon Doughty, a dairy rancher in Point Reyes Station. "And we're already talking about an industry that is becoming marginalized."

Dairy ranchers hope to reach a compromise that would allow them to continue to buy sand from Lawson's for a short period of time after the permit expires.

"There are alternatives, and maybe they could set aside some sand for the ranchers to use in the meantime," Doughty said. "But to just cut it off (once Lawson's permit expires) would severely impact us."

Lawson's 10-year county permit, granted in 1996, expires once 600,000 tons of sand have been excavated from the site. West Marin environmentalists have long said the quarry has not met the conditions of the permit and have said the operation has put plant and wildlife species within the sand dune habitat at risk.

Citing a report that 583,000 tons had been excavated as of mid-2004, environmentalists also have said Lawson's is much closer to reaching the 600,000-ton limit than it should be.

"There are better solutions to livestock bedding than Dillon Beach sand," said Catherine Caufield, executive director of the Environmental Action Committee of West Marin. "There are far better solutions than sand, and this particular sand is not only a natural irreplaceable resource, but it's also a part of a fantastic, irreplaceable dune system."

The Marin County Farm Bureau is in the midst of surveying the approximately 30 dairy ranchers in Marin to find out what substance they use for bedding and how they feel about making the transition to another substance.

Several Marin ranchers already have made the move, switching from sand to such alternatives as rice hulls, wood shavings, almond shells and dried manure.

Albert Straus of Straus Family Creamery in Marshall uses rice hulls. His ranch switched from sand five years ago because it constantly had to be cleaned out of the ranch's ponds and because of its heavy impact on equipment.

"The rice hulls have worked well for us," he said. "We compost it and it goes back on our fields as fertilizer."

Straus said he understood why sand was the preferred bedding for many ranchers but expected the transition for them to be easy once they understood the benefits of the alternatives.

Alternatives such as rice hulls require a bit more diligence, he said. They must be kept dry to avoid bacteria growth and possible infection, he said.

While not a dairy rancher, David Evans of Marin Sun Farms said the extra expense for alternatives to sand is worth it.

"Sand might be slightly cheaper, but with rice hulls and organic material like that, you can turn the matter back to the land by composting it, and that's a huge benefit," he said.

Once the farm bureau survey is finished, Marin County Supervisor Steve Kinsey plans to work with farm bureau officials and Sonoma County Supervisor Mike Reilly to come up with a short-term compromise. One possibility is allowing the excavation of sand to continue for a period of 6-12 months after the 600,000-ton limit is reached.

Caufield wants a slew of questions answered before reaching such a compromise and wants a guarantee that ranchers will be the only recipients of the additional sand - not the golf courses, construction firms and garden-supply companies that Lawson's also counts among its clients.

In a letter she sent to Kinsey earlier this month, Caufield wrote, "Would there be an oversight body to ensure that the sand went only to certain buyers?"

"We need assurances that prolonging mining would not merely prolong the conversion process," she continued. "What steps are Lawson's sand users taking to convert to one of the many alternative cattle bedding materials that exist? What steps are county officials taking to facilitate the conversion? Is there evidence that this conversion cannot be made without extending the mining?"

Doughty said she wasn't optimistic about a compromise.

"I hope there's some kind of compromise here, but it's a long shot, I think," she said.

Caufield is more optimistic. She hopes county officials give ranchers one year to switch over to an alternative with the condition that Lawson's sell sand only to dairy ranchers.

"To us, that would be fair to the ranchers, which we, of course, do want to be," she said. "Ranchers were not aware that they were using a resource that is about to run out. I don't think we're in conflict with the ranchers."

As for Lawson's, which also operates a campground with more than 1,200 campsites, including 230 permanent trailer spaces, the ongoing battles with environmentalists have made the family willing to part with the sand quarry business. It has increased its camping rates to make up for the impending loss of the quarry.

"It's a small part of our business, but it's very important to the dairymen," said Michael Lawson, a Dillon Beach resident. "But we can live with it."