

Burden Hill Forest and farms more valuable than sand

By Matt Blake

In his Oct. 2 letter to the editor, mining proponent Ed Warren was incorrect in stating that sand and gravel mining doesn't have any impact on ground and surface water supplies. The Littoral Society also spoke with Dr. Navoy of the U.S. Geological Survey, who recently made a presentation on water supply before the Quinton Township Environmental Commission, which Mr. Warren attended.

Dr. Navoy did not in fact give mining a clean pass, because there are many serious environmental impacts associated with this industry and its potential effects on air, water, habitat, wildlife, and community quality of life.

Indeed, Mr. Warren's suggestion that clear-cutting woodlands to prepare sites for landscape mining won't affect vegetation or ground and surface water resources is plainly outrageous.

What Dr. Navoy did say was that different mines have different impacts and these impacts depend on variables such as their size, location, depth and water consumption.

With respect to the specific case of the "existing" mining operations in Quinton Township, Dr. Navoy did not believe those operations as currently practiced were having an adverse impact on nearby wells for several important reasons — they do not "currently" mine below the water table, consume vast

amounts of water, and the mining operations at the southeastern end of the township are not tapping sands that are related to the aquifers used by residences in the northwestern part of the township.

According to Dr. Navoy, water issues become a concern for nearby wells and ecology when: 1) mining pits are permitted to dig into the groundwater table and dewater to facilitate operations, or 2) where sediment-laden runoff is allowed to leave the site, causing problems for sensitive habitats and aquatic environments downstream.

What's important to take away from Dr. Navoy's presentation was that he was addressing only current mining operations — not future mines, major expansions, more damaging practices and related industries — the very concerns motivating ongoing attempts by residents to pass an ordinance that would put the brakes on mining before it gets out of control.

Of course mining's impacts are not limited to water supply. This couldn't be more true in Quinton Township, where mining increasingly threatens to expand its footprint at the expense of some of the richest woodland habitat and farmland in the entire Delaware Bayshore region.

One of the current sand mining permittees is mining land that was once agricultural land, and if mining permits continue to be issued in coming decades, it is likely that

additional agricultural land, in addition to valuable woodland, will be lost.

Continued clear-cutting here for bigger mines as well as new subdivisions is also damaging the vital services these woodlands provide in the form of purifying ground and surface water entering our creeks, wells and waterways.

As the largest remaining forest in the lower Delaware River basin, the 15,000-acre Burden Hill Forest plays a regionally important role in the absorption and storage of harmful greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and its permanent protection against ongoing forest destruction must become a municipal and countywide priority.

Quinton Township's decision-makers can take a lead role in this effort by finally acting on the recommendations of its master plan and the supportive vote made by the planning board almost two years ago in favor of a new soil removal ordinance, which would prohibit new mining while honoring those in existence and approved in the past.

Ed Warren's claim that mining won't impact people's drinking water downplays legitimate community concerns. There's more to water supply than quantity — there's also quality and safety, and the potential threat of water becoming contaminated at these sites is real and ongoing.

The locating of heavy machinery, trucks and equipment atop highly porous sands, often just

above or within groundwater, leaves little room for error where nearby shallow wells are a glass away from human consumption.

Add to this the industrial noise and the hundreds of diesel hauler truck trips per day that follow larger operations and typical accessory uses such as cement and asphalt production and recycling.

The high volume of heavy trucks often becomes a major community concern because these vehicles release tons of lung-damaging particulate matter, and emissions containing over 40 toxic substances that the EPA lists as hazardous air contaminants. This is the same agency which has proposed classifying diesel exhaust as a probable human carcinogen.

With this in mind, it's no wonder why more and more towns in South Jersey, which already host their fair share of mines, are seeking to limit new ones and major expansions with prohibitive ordinances.

We urge Quinton Township residents to tell Mayor Joseph Donelson that Burden Hill Forest's woodlands, valuable farmland and quality of life are irreplaceable resources and should not be sacrificed for sand.

Matt Blake manages the American Littoral Society's Delaware Bay Program. He has a Master's of Science degree from Antioch University in Resource Management and Administration.