



## **DNR sets October meeting for seed orchard & mining project**

24 September 2021

A meeting is set next month to educate community members about a proposed seed orchard project that would involve gravel extraction from a site in Genoa Township.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources owns two parcels off Brighton Road and Cunningham Lake Road, one that's 50-acres and another totaling 77-acres next to the DNR's Tree Improvement Center. There, seed orchards are grown to produce bushy trees. The cones are harvested and the seeds extracted, which are then used in their nursery to produce seedlings.

The two parcels were in the surplus land category and basically on their way to auction to be sold to the highest bidder. Instead, the DNR is looking at creating another seed orchard with a park-like setting but there's a lot involved to get the property to a usable condition – which is where all the questions are surfacing according to MDNR Silviculturist Jason Hartman. He says both parcels have a lot of topography and are very hilly and to manage seed orchards, they need to be able to mow the site but wouldn't be able to with the current conditions.

Hartman says they're proposing a sand and gravel lease for the larger reclamation project on the site. That means a successful lessee would be able to utilize some of the material on-site in exchange for leveling it.

The mining operation has spurred opposition from neighbors, which began after clear-cutting took place on the site in January. Many have been voicing general skepticism of the project, as well as concerns about water and air quality, truck traffic, noise, dust and road capacity – with one residents erecting a sign on his property off Brighton Road that reads "Stop The Gravel Pit".

As for how long potential mining would go on, Hartman says that's the piece probably most up in the air right now. He says they've been having good conversations with the township and the main question is "where is the middle ground"? In order to make the project practical, Hartman says they have to give the company enough time to do it but they also want to want to balance that against the impacts on the community. Exactly where that lands right now, he says they're unsure but they anticipate a lessee bringing a proposal forward that would include a framework for time and then negotiate.

Hartman says they haven't gone out to bid yet for the lease but envision working through that this fall and before the end of the year. He said they'll advertise, receive proposals and recommend an agreement, which the DNR director would ultimately approve or deny.

Hartman says the way they'll frame the bid package is for reclamation - as that's what the project is in and of itself – it's not "go in, mine away, take what you want and restore it when you're done". He says while the lessee would be taking the material, they would also be re-contouring the site to the end goal – it would not be a situation where they take as much as they can and then work to restore – as the priority of the project is the reclamation of the site.

There's also a chloride plume beneath one of the parcels, which Hartman says creates a whole other aspect in regard to the complexity of the project. He noted that before they started to consider this, they talked to the water resources division in EGLE and ran the idea by them to see if this type of

project would have any adverse effect. Hartman said data suggests there would be no impact on the plume - which is basically stable, not growing at this time, and in monitoring status by the state.

As the property was previously dedicated as surplus, Hartman says if for some reason they can't proceed with the project, then they're back to stage one. That means the likely result is they would end up auctioning off the property because they've already done the review. He stressed that's not meant as a threat in any way, it's just the facts of the situation and if they're not able to proceed, that's the likely other path this would end up going down.

As for concerns about the earth disturbance, Hartman said it's, unfortunately, the likely result of the work and would be a hurdle to overcome whether they do the seed orchard or if a private entity wanted to develop a subdivision. He said some earthmoving would have to happen and they would need to work through the steps to make sure it's done in the most appropriate way.

Hartman stressed the DNR is definitely not in this to make money, it's about trying to reclaim the site for a higher and better purpose and finding an economically feasible way to do it. Any lessee granted would have to go through an extensive permitting process involving a variety of different agencies.

A public information meeting is scheduled for October 12th at Brighton High School from 6 to 8pm in the performing arts auditorium.

Source: <https://www.whmi.com/news/article/mdnr-seed-orchard-sand-gravel-mining-genoa>