The GOOD, the BAD and the UGLY of Gravel Mining in Alberta and Abroad

Donna Mendelsohn, 25 May 2015
Our infrastructure relies heavily on aggregate resources. However, these resources **MUST** be managed in more **SUSTAINABLE** ways, respecting our **VITAL** resources of healthy land, air, biodiversity and aquatic ecosystems.
Enlightened jurisdictions world wide direct gravel mining to locations where impacts are least severe. Destruction of floodplain or aquifer function **CANNOT** be “mitigated.”
Rebalancing the Load:
The need for an aggregates conservation strategy for Ontario
GOOD

Recycling can conserve resources and reduce waste.
GOOD

Initiatives from Other Jurisdictions

Several European countries have adopted policies to reduce demand and increase recycling.

Financial Incentives for Beneficial Practices
Significant Taxes for Ecological Degradations
Significant Royalties for Extracted Materials

Funds raised are reinvested into improved management.
Alternatives to Increasing the Supply of Gravel

Substitute with Alternative Materials

Improve Design of Infrastructure and Buildings

Improve Development Patterns
Identifying ESAs is a critical first step in land use planning.
Sturgeon County, Municipal Development Plan: "All valley banks, setback buffer strips and the lands within the 1:100 year flood plain will be identified and dedicated as Environmental Reserve."

MD of Willow Creek, SDAB Notice of Decision: "The Board ... has determined that the evidence presented at the hearing did not suitably demonstrate that the potential negative impacts of establishing a gravel mining operation within an environmentally sensitive floodplain could be mitigated."
GOOD

City of Edmonton, Municipal Development Plan: “…resource extraction is prohibited within the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System…”

Red Deer County, SDAB Notice of Decision: "The Board does not consider it to be good planning to permit this change of topography (gravel mine) in proximity to the Medicine River and Dickson Creek, given that at some point either or both may spill over their banks and flood waters would naturally be directed to this low area..."
BAD

BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE GRAVEL MINING IN ALBERTA

Lack of Education
Lack of Enforcement
Lack of Cumulative Data
Lack of Full Cost Accounting
Lack of Fair Public Participation
Lack of Integrated Decision Making
Lack of Integrated Regulatory Process
Lack of Integrated Landscape Management
BAD

LACK OF PROVINCIAL LEADERSHIP
BAD

Ignored Recommendations from the Auditor General to ESRD

Enforce reclamation obligations.
Ensure sufficiency of security deposits.
Enforce penalties against non-compliance.
Develop system to verify quantities mined.
Improve gravel mining data management.
UNFORTUNATELY, in Alberta every time a gravel mining application is refused by one municipality, more pressure for similar exploitation is brought to bear on another municipality lacking capacity to handle the pressure. With Federal and Provincial governments failing to regulate this industry, pressure is further downloaded onto communities and residents, causing great stress, community discord, financial loss and ultimately loss of ecosystem function and integrity.
Proposed Lafarge Floodplain Pit at Fort Assiniboine
County Council ignored the community and rezoned the land.
"Mother Nature blessed the Fort Assiniboine region with millions of tonnes of gravel and it’s time to take economic advantage of that fact... In all honesty this is just dragging on and on and on... we’ve wasted too many months already. Let’s do some business. I’m tired of waiting."
WOODLANDS COUNTY COUNCILLOR

“My son attends a very noisy school in Whitecourt, so I do not understand why you have a problem with a gravel haul route beside the school yard in Fort Assiniboine.”
WOODLANDS COUNTY COUNCILLOR

“Why should we be concerned with conserving agricultural land, when we can get food cheaper from China or Brazil.”
UGLY

ALBERTA ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPAL DISTRICTS AND COUNTIES

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Got Gravel?
"Appreciating the definition for wet pit under the Reclamation Glossary for wet pit, being 'an excavation that is below the water table', the comment surrounding the departments view of wet pit versus dry pit - is that there will be associated dewatering and while the aggregate may be wet, it is not in fact bailed or extraction directly within the water. This is an important distinction as if mining into the ground water, an approval is required. The situation is treated as a dry pit..."
“You are not directly affected if you do not own adjacent property."

What planet is this bureaucrat from, where unhealthy noise levels, loss of water quantity or quality, loss of air quality or loss of quality of life are not direct impacts??
"Quite frankly, gravel is something that we use as a resource in this province. When we take it out of the rivers and it renews itself, it’s an important resource that we have. We use it for many different things in the province. We do, though, have rules and regulations for when the extraction of gravel is happening, that those rules and regulations must take place. Quite frankly, our department monitors and evaluates that very well, the compliance, that that happens."
UGLY

Gravel Operators / Municipal Politicians

Unacceptable Excuses:

“ESRD allows this activity”

“So and So is doing something worse.”

“This is an economic necessity.”
SUMMARY

Some gravel operators and municipalities in Alberta are doing far better than others. BUT, all of you can do better!! The gravel industry and municipal planners will hear far less protest from concerned citizens when it can be demonstrated that ecologically sensitive areas, including aquifers, floodplains and riparian lands are being protected, and rights of citizens to peaceful and healthy enjoyment of their homes, workplaces and recreation areas are respected and protected proactively. If all gravel operators and municipal planners were truly making their best efforts, we would not be seeing Alberta families forced to spend their life savings to fight off unsuitable gravel pits!!