



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

July 14, 2006

Linda Self
El Centro Field Office
Bureau of Land Management
1661 S. 4th Street
El Centro, CA 92243

Subject: Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR)
for the United States Gypsum Company Expansion/Modernization Project,
Imperial County, California [CEQ #20060138]

Dear Ms. Self:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the above referenced document. Our review and comments are provided pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA Implementation Regulations at 40 CFR 1500-1508, and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act.

EPA has rated this Draft EIS/EIR as EC-2 – Environmental Concerns-Insufficient Information (see the enclosed "Summary of Rating Definitions"). EPA is concerned the proposed project could have adverse impacts to watershed resources, including water quality and habitat, groundwater quality and quantity, and air quality. These impacts should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. We believe there may be other alternatives or further opportunities to avoid or mitigate impacts to waters of the U.S., groundwater resources, and air quality. These should be addressed in the Final EIS/EIR.

We appreciate the opportunity to review this Draft EIS/EIR and request a copy of the Final EIS/EIR when it is officially filed with our Washington, D.C., office. If you have any questions, please call me at (415) 972-3988, or have your staff call Jeanne Geselbracht at (415) 972-3853.

Sincerely,

/s/

Duane James, Manager
Environmental Review Office

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Enclosures: (1) EPA's Summary of Rating Definitions
(2) EPA's Detailed Comments

Cc: Jurg Heuberger, Imperial County Planning and Development Services
Robert Smith, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

U.S. Gypsum Company Expansion/Modernization Project Draft EIS/EIR
EPA Comments – July 2006

Waters of the United States

The Draft EIS/EIR (pp. 3.3-101 and 102) briefly addresses the drainage diversion that future quarry operations will require in Fish Creek Wash. However, the document does not describe the wash or discuss in detail how the wash would be affected by the proposed project. Additionally, the Draft EIS/EIR does not include a large-scale map clearly depicting and labeling the surface waters in the project vicinity or locations of the proposed drainage diversions throughout future quarrying phases in the gypsum outcrop and alluvium areas. The Draft EIS/EIR also does not indicate whether or how the pipeline projects would affect waters of the U.S.

Recommendation: The Final EIS/EIR should describe all waters of the U.S. and discuss how they could be affected by the project, including past impacts. The discussion should include acreages and channel lengths, habitat types, values, and functions of these waters. The discussion should also reference project-scale maps that clearly depict these waters and their proximity to each part of the project (e.g., pipelines, quarries, roads, etc.). The maps should also depict the existing channel diversions as well as proposed channel diversions for all future quarrying phases.

Recommendation: The Final EIS/EIR should address opportunities for improving the quality and quantity of affected wetlands in designing facilities.

It appears that activities involved in the proposed mine expansion would involve the discharge of dredged or fill material into waters of the United States and, therefore, require authorization by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and compliance with the substantive environmental criteria of the Federal Guidelines (Guidelines) at 40 CFR 230 promulgated under Section 404(b)(1) of the Clean Water Act. The Draft EIS/EIR does not provide sufficient information on avoidance alternatives, the aquatic resources at risk, or project-related impacts to waters of the United States, including wetlands.

If a Section 404 permit is required, EPA will review the project for compliance with the 404(b)(1) Guidelines. Pursuant to 40 CFR 230, any permitted discharge into waters of the U.S. must be the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative available to achieve the project purpose.

Recommendation: The Final EIS/EIR should identify all required Federal and State permits for work potentially affecting wetlands or waters of the U.S.

Recommendation: The Final EIS/EIR should include an evaluation of the project alternatives in order to demonstrate the project's compliance with the 404(b)(1) Guidelines. If, under the proposed project, dredged or fill material

would be discharged into waters of the U.S., the Final EIS/EIR should describe the potential environmental impacts and discuss alternatives to avoid or minimize those discharges.

Recommendation: If a discharge is permitted, required mitigation for impacts to waters of the U.S. should be identified and committed to in the Final EIS/EIR and Record of Decision (ROD) for evaluation by the public and decision-makers. Mitigation should be implemented in advance of the impacts to avoid habitat losses due to the lag time between the occurrence of the impact and successful mitigation. The discussion should include the following information:

- Acreage and habitat type of waters of the U.S. that would be created or restored;
- Water sources to maintain the mitigation area;
- The revegetation plans including the numbers and age of each species to be planted;
- Maintenance and monitoring plans, including performance standards to determine mitigation success;
- The size and location of mitigation zones;
- The parties that would be ultimately responsible for the plan's success; and
- Contingency plans that would be enacted if the original plan fails.

Groundwater Resources

The Draft EIS/EIR discusses the potential for the proposed project to mobilize total dissolved solids (TDS) in groundwater. While it also acknowledges that other contaminants of concern (i.e., fluoride, boron, and iron) are found in the groundwater, the Draft EIS/EIR does not discuss how drawdown from the project could affect the concentration of these other contaminants in area wells.

Recommendation: The Final EIS/EIR should discuss the extent to which groundwater drawdown from the proposed project could mobilize other contaminants and affect their concentrations in area wells. If these contaminants could be mobilized as well, the Final EIS/EIR and ROD should commit to appropriate mitigation measures and identify mitigation action levels for these contaminants.

It is unclear from the Draft EIS/EIR whether additional opportunities exist to increase water efficiency and/or reduce water demand at the Plaster City Plant or the quarry, or whether any of the wastewater can be treated and either reused or recharged. All opportunities to conserve, reuse, and recycle water should be seriously considered, especially in light of the scarcity of usable water in the project vicinity.

Recommendation: The Final EIS/EIR should explore and evaluate opportunities to increase water efficiency, reduce water demand, and treat and reuse or recharge water to the extent practicable. The Final EIS/EIR and ROD should include commitments to achieve these measures.

The Draft EIS/EIR (section 2.6.5.1) discusses an alternative that involves drilling new production wells in the vicinity of the Plaster City plant. It appears, however, that groundwater within only one mile of the plant was evaluated for this purpose. It is unclear whether groundwater up to a few miles from the plant is of higher quality and could be used for the project.

Recommendation: The Final EIS/EIR should discuss whether groundwater up to a few miles from the plant could be used to supply the plant. The discussion should also address whether the TDS concentration in that groundwater is sufficiently lower than TDS in groundwater at the plant such that it could be blended with water from the existing wells in the Ocotillo/Coyote Wells Groundwater Basin for project needs.

Air Quality

The Draft EIS/EIR includes several important and effective measures to reduce and control air emissions from the proposed project. For the pipeline and well construction projects, the document mentions “standard construction measures,” including an onsite water truck, to reduce dust during those activities. Additional opportunities exist to reduce air emissions.

Recommendation: We recommend that the mitigation measures (3.6-1a, 1b, and 1-c) that will be used for quarry operations also be applied to pipeline and well construction projects.

Recommendation: We also recommend the following measures to reduce dust at the construction sites.

- Vehicles hauling soil or other loose materials will be covered with tarp or other means;
- Cover or apply soil stabilizers to exposed stock piles;
- Sweep adjacent paved streets with water sweepers in the event soil materials are carried onto them;
- Limit traffic speeds in the construction area and along access roads;
- Cover or apply soil stabilizers to disturbed areas within five days of completion of the activity at each site; and
- Reclaim and revegetate disturbed areas as soon as practicable after completion of activity at each site.