Historic Biological Reports
Scan Control Sheet

County Project Number(s): CUP-4171

Report Type (check one):
- ☐ Initial Study
- ☒ Species Inventory/Survey
- ☐ Focused Study
- ☐ EIR
- ☐ Draft EIR
- ☐ EIS
- ☐ ND
- ☐ MND
- ☐ Other

Report Date (Month/Day/Year): _____

Check if the following apply to the report:

☒ Wetland and/or aquatic habitat

☐ Within designated Coastal Zone

☒ Potential movement corridor for fish and/or wildlife

COUNTY OF VENTURA
BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES FIELD SURVEY

Date: March 24, 2000
Requestor: Lou Merzario (County of Ventura)
Project: CUP-4171 Mod. No. 2 (Best Rock Products Corp.)
Field Study: Yes
Justification: Review of area for possible sensitive species habitat.

Prepared by: Duane Vander Pluym (Rincon Consultants, Inc., 805/641-1000)

A. DISCUSSION

The following information is based on a brief biological field survey of the site conducted on March 20, 2000, and a review of pertinent literature, most importantly the Final EIR for Grimes Rock, Inc., Sand and Gravel Mine, CUP-4874 (SCH No. 96071021). This EIR examined operations at another mining operation immediately east of the southern mining operation discussed in this report. Vegetation maps have been prepared for the project site mining areas based on the limited field investigation and are included in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 3 contains photographs of the southern site.

The project site is a current rock products mining operation. Two separate site areas are under consideration for this CUP: the first is a red rock quarry composed of a steep hillside adjacent to Grimes Canyon Road and Grimes Canyon Creek; the second is within an upper watershed to the south. The northern site has been mined for over 50 years, while the southern site has been operating for the last 13 years. This latter site is characterized by very steep topography with narrow incised canyons, and much of the lower part of the site is already devoted to extensive sand and gravel mining. Two small drainages flow into the existing operations area from the south through relatively steep, incised canyons that lack any riparian vegetation. Besides the barren disturbed land within the mining operation, the southern site contains primarily Venturan coastal sage scrub vegetation, with some annual grassland present on upper slopes (Figure 1).

Dominant plants within the coastal sage scrub vegetation present at the site are sagebrush (Artemisia californica) and purple sage (Salvia leucophylla). Other common species include buckwheat (Eriogonum fasciculatum), California sunflower (Encelia californica), chaparral yucca (Yucca whipplei), pinebush (Ericameria pinifolia), saw-toothed goldenbush (Hazardia squarrosa), giant wild rye (Leymus condensatus), lupine (Lupinus albifrons), California aster (Lessingia filaginifolia), and wand chicory (Stephanomeria virgata). Uncommon shrubs found scattered through the site include those more typical of chaparral vegetation, including chaparral mallow (Malacothamnus fasciculatus), lemonade berry (Rhus integrifolia), toyon (Heteromeles arbutifolia), buckbrush (Ceanothus sp.), chamise (Adenostoma fasciculatum), prickly phlox (Leptodactylon californicum), elderberry (Sambucus mexicana), and laurel sumac (Malosma laurina). Annual grasses are found between the shrubs, including wild oats (Avena fatua) and various brome grasses (Bromus sp.). The density of shrubs varies greatly throughout the site, ranging from scattered sparse shrubs on the steeper slopes to uniformly distributed shrubs with about 90 percent ground cover.

In disturbed areas of the coastal sage scrub, additional common plants include tree tobacco (Nicotiana glauca), deerweed (Lotus scoparius), mustard (Brassica sp.), storksbill (Erodium sp.), horehound (Marrubium vulgare), bindweed (Convolvulus arventis), milk thistle (Silybum marianum), manroot (Marah macrocarpus), fennel (Foeniculum vulgare), and various annual grasses. These weedy plants are also the primary components of the ruderal vegetation found in the disturbed portions of the site.

Annual grassland at the proposed project area is composed of non-native species such as ripgut brome (Bromus diandrus), oats (Avena sp), soft chess (Bromus hordeaceus), foxtail fescue (Vulpia myuros), and barley (Hordeum vulgare). Various spring and summer flowering herbs are also expected to occur in the grassland based on the field studies conducted from the adjacent site, and these include phacelia (Phacelia cicutaria), wand chicory (Stephanomeria virgata), white everlasting (Gnaphalium canescens), goldenaster (Heterotheca villosa), and croton (Croton californicus).

The proposed project contains several areas that are cleared and mostly barren due to past disturbances. These areas include the main dirt access road that extends from Grimes Canyon Road, the red rock and sand and gravel mining areas, and the sediment pond. Although these areas are mostly barren, there are scattered areas of introduced weeds such as Russian thistle (Salsola tragus), black mustard (Brassica nigra), milk thistle, and castor bean (Ricinus communis). Within the southern mining operation area, the ground has been denuded of virtually all vegetation (Photo 1, Figure 3). What little vegetation is present is comprised of weedy species (ruderal vegetation), except for a small planted and maintained oak tree near the site office.

Adjacent to the sediment pond and along the steep drainages, the slopes are virtually vertical and lack any vegetation (Photo 1, Figure 3). It was noted that several cliff swallow nests were located in the upper portions of the crevices on some of the cliff faces.

A small pond (~0.5 acre) that serves as a sediment trap is located adjacent to the access road in the southern mine area. This man-made pond contains freshwater marsh elements, particularly cattail (Typha latifolia), mulefat (Baccharis salicifolia), and willows (Salix lasiolepis and S. exigua). Scattered mulefat shrubs are also located along the margins of the sediment pond and on slumping slopes in drainages within the disturbed coastal sage scrub area north of the sediment pond.

The northern red rock mine area includes mostly coastal sage scrub on its steep upper slopes, but it is highly disturbed in the flat areas and on the working face of the mine (Figure 2). A small oak woodland composed of several coast live oak trees (Quercus agrifolia) is located easterly of the mine entrance on a steep slope that is not proposed for any mining activity. The understory of this woodland consists primarily of annual grasses with a few sage shrubs. Other vegetation at this site includes weedy plants, including a large stand of castor bean, and a pond (~0.5 acre) at the north end of the site. A few scattered small cottonwood trees (Populus fremontii) are present at this pond in addition to freshwater marsh and willow scrub elements. Similar to the pond at the southern site, this pond was man-made to serve as a sediment trap.

Grimes Canyon Creek is located adjacent to, but outside of the red rock mine area. A stand of eucalyptus trees off the site marks the edge of the northern property line along the creek, and several oak trees are present between the creek and Grimes Canyon Road, but are also outside of the site.

Common animals typical of the rural area and the scrub habitat present at the site were noted during the field visit. Due to the late winter timing of the visit and the coolness of the day, no reptiles were seen during the field visit, though western fence lizard, western rattlesnake, and side-blotched lizard are expected to be present. Pacific tree frogs were the only amphibians found in the ponds, though western toad may also be present. Neither adults nor tadpoles of the exotic bullfrog were heard or observed at the site. The occasional de-watering of the ponds may have served to prevent this species from becoming established at the site.

Mammal sign noted at the site included that of pocket gopher, California ground squirrel, deer mice, wood rat, coyote, deer, and domestic dog. The upper grassy slopes had numerous gopher and ground squirrel holes and these species provide an important prey base to raptorial birds and coyotes that utilize the area. The most common birds noted at the site are those typical of scrub habitats, including California towhee, rufous-sided towhee, wrentit, scrub jay, white-crowned sparrow, Anna's hummingbird, California quail, Bewick's wren, and blue-gray gnatcatcher. Many cliff swallows and a rough-winged swallow were present over the ponds and grassland areas, foraging on flying insects. Red-tailed hawk, Cooper's hawk, and raven were seen soaring over the site, though no nesting areas for these species were seen within the site boundaries. Other birds seen at the site included a band-tailed pigeon, house finch, and lesser goldfinch.

The pond area provides important habitat for nesting red-winged blackbirds. Other species seen and potentially nesting at the ponds include song sparrow, black phoebe, mallard, Virgina rail, and yellowthroat. The migrant yellow-rumped warbler was also seen at the ponds.

No listed sensitive plant species are known to occur at the site or in the near vicinity (Ventura County, February 1998, "Final Environmental Impact Report, Grimes Rock Sand and Gravel Mine, CUP-4874). The Catalina mariposa lily (a California Native Plant Society list 4 species, but not a state listed sensitive species) could occur in the area, and there is a low possibility for the Plummer's mariposa-lily (state species of concern). The site was checked for bulbs and residual stalks, but the only bulbs found were blue dicks (Dichlostoma sp.), which were fairly common in the grassland area. No significant effects to state or federal listed rare, threatened, or endangered plant species are expected.

No protected tree species are proposed for direct removal by the ongoing mining operation, and consequently, no impacts to protected trees would occur with the ongoing mining operations.

No state or federal listed endangered or threatened animals are known to exist at the site, though there is a slight potential for the federal threatened California gnatcatcher to be present at the site. A somewhat disjunct population of gnatcatchers are known in the Moorpark area about 1.3 miles southeast of the site, and marginally suitable breeding habitat is present at the site within the coastal sage scrub present on the canyon slopes and hills. A specific survey was conducted for this small bird at the adjacent mining operation (Grimes Rock Sand and Gravel Mine EIR)

with negative results. That EIR concluded that habitat in the area is marginal for this species and it is unlikely to occur in the area. Nonetheless, it is recommended that a survey be conducted to avoid the potential for a violation of the federal Endangered Species Act.

Two other listed species, the arroyo toad (federal endangered) and California red-legged frog (federal threatened), are known to occur in the region, but have little potential for being present at the site. The ponds at the site do not contain sandy shoals suitable for the arroyo toad, and there are no historic or recent records of red-legged frog within 10 miles of the site (Stephenson and Calcarone, 1999).

Besides those species listed under the federal and state Endangered Species Acts, several other animals are considered sensitive due to declining populations (California Fish and Game, June 1999b). Sensitive animal species possible at the site include the coast horned lizard (California and federal species of concern [SC]), Cooper's hawk (state SC), loggerhead shrike (state and federal SC), golden eagle (state SC), northern harrier (state SC), and southern California rufous-crowned sparrow (state and federal SC).

The coast horned lizard (Phrynosoma coronatum) occurs throughout the coastal region of southern California in chaparral and coastal sage scrub habitats. This species may occur in the proposed project area, in flat areas or sandy washes with coastal sage scrub vegetation. It has not been observed in the area during the various field surveys conducted at the Grimes Rock site, suggesting that its abundance and distribution are limited. Possible habitats at the project site are generally too disturbed or are too densely vegetated to meet the habitat needs of this species.

The loggerhead shrike occurs in sparse coastal sage scrub and grassland habitats throughout southern California. This species was observed in the proposed project vicinity (Grimes Rock EIR, 1998). The loggerhead shrike is widespread throughout the Santa Susana Mountains, and the habitat available at the site would only meet the needs of 1-2 pairs. Continued mining activity at the site would not result in a significant decrease in this bird's population level. After reclamation, the site may become more suitable for this species.

The rufous-crowned sparrow occurs in sparse coastal sage scrub and grassland habitats throughout southern California, generally associated with rock outcroppings and thin soils. This species requires yuccas and tall shrubs for perches for singing and breeding displays. The rufous-crowned sparrow was observed at the adjacent mining operation (Grimes Rock EIR, 1998), and it would most likely be present at the northern red rock mine site. This species is still widespread throughout the Santa Susana and Santa Monica Mountains and the loss of habitat at the site during mining operations is not expected to cause a significant impact to this species.

The following raptors that are considered "species of special concern" by CDFG and/or USFWS occur in southern California as residents or winter migrants: golden eagle, ferruginous hawk, Cooper's hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, northern harrier, and prairie falcon. The oak woodlands in the project area may provide roosting and nesting habitat for some of these species. The project would not affect any woodland areas, and no significant impacts to these species would be expected.

No riparian breeding bird species that are considered sensitive (such as the endangered least Bell's vireo, the blue grosbeak, the yellow-breasted chat, the yellow warbler, and the endangered willow flycatcher) are known to occur at the proposed project site. The available willow habitat at the site around the ponds is not considered suitable for most of these species, though it is possible that blue grosbeak (locally sensitive, not listed) may breed at the site. This area is already subject to disturbances related to the mining operations, and any birds breeding in this area would have become adapted to such activity. Therefore, no significant effects would be anticipated.

The ponds were checked for southwestern pond turtle, but none were noted, and the ponds generally lacked suitable basking sites. The pond habitat at the site could be used by the western spadefoot toad (CDFG and USFWS species of special concern), but no tadpoles were observed within the ponds during the field study at a time when the toads should have been breeding. It is possible that operations at the site that includes periodic rapid de-watering of the ponds has prevented this species from becoming established at the site. Preferred spadefoot toad habitat (vernal pools) is not present in the area. No sensitive mammalian species (including bat species), or insect species are known or likely to extensively utilize the habitats at the proposed project site based on a review of applicable literature and results of nearby field studies.

The proposed project would not permit any additional land area for mining that is not already approved. Currently disturbed areas would continue to supply the source for material for an additional five years before undisturbed lands would be affected by mining operations. After completion of mining, the southern project site is proposed to be graded at a slope less than that which naturally occurs in the area. The bottom areas currently occupied by processing equipment and the sediment pond would be graded as a nearly flat area that would be reseeded with a grass-woodland seed mix for long term use of the site for grazing. The surrounding slopes would be graded at an angle of 1.5:1 (horizontal:vertical) and revegetated with a coastal sagebrush seed mix. Concrete "V"-ditches would be used to drain water laterally across the manufactured slopes and into a 24" perforated pipe that would disperse the runoff water across the flatland. The coastal sagebrush seed mix would also be used for reclamation of the slope of the red rock mine.

Coastal sage scrub vegetation has been identified by the California Department of Fish and Game as a sensitive plant community and is considered "very threatened" due to extensive losses of this habitat type, particularly in the southern portion of its range in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego Counties. Within Ventura County, the amount of coastal sage scrub vegetation is still extensive, with substantial acreage of this community type preserved within designated open space and recreational lands. Given the amount of coastal sage scrub still present in the vicinity adjacent to the site, the temporary loss of coastal sage scrub vegetation at the site would be considered an adverse, but less than significant impact. After completion of the sand and gravel operation, the slopes would be revegetated using a seed mix of local plants that are known to occur within the site and the adjacent area. Once established, this sage scrub vegetation would replace that which would be lost during the continued operation of the mining.

Wetland habitat is also considered a sensitive community type because of past extensive losses from agricultural and urban development. It appears that no natural wetlands were located

within the site and this habitat is currently limited to the man-made ponds at the lower end of each mining operation. These wetlands are under the control of the operator, and they are drained during heavy storms when it appears that they may be overtopped by rainfall runoff. While these wetland areas do provide breeding habitat for several bird species, they do not constitute a significant wetland resource under County guidelines because of their man-made nature and ongoing function as sediment traps. These wetlands may also not be considered under the jurisdiction of the Army Corps of Engineers or the California Department of Fish and Game because of their man-made nature. The other drainages within the site do not contain wetland vegetation.

The proposed project would eventually removed these ponds as part of the final grading for the site under the reclamation plan. The loss of these ponds is not considered a significant impact due to their small size and limited wetland functions. Nonetheless, these ponds do currently offer additional wildlife habitat that is not otherwise available at the site and this loss is considered an adverse effect. Changes to the reclamation plan are recommended to maintain this habitat within the site.

The project site is not within the coastal zone, but rather is in an upper watershed of Grimes Canyon Creek, a small tributary to the Santa Clara River. Because of the distance from the coast, no impacts on coastal resources are anticipated.

The project area is located in the western portion of the Santa Susana Mountains, between South Mountain to the west, and Oak Ridge to the east. The Santa Clara River Valley is north of the site, while the Arroyo Simi/Arroyo Las Posas Valley is located to the south. Both valleys are extensively developed with agriculture (particularly orchards) and scattered low density residential development.

The project area is mostly undisturbed and remote. It contains physical and habitat features that are suitable for the movement of highly mobile wildlife such as coyote, mountain lion, and deer, that is, long ridgetops, drainages, and dirt roads. Wildlife is likely to pass through portions of the proposed project area when traveling east-west in the Santa Susana Mountains. Similarly, wildlife that may travel north-south between the Arroyo Simi/Arroyo Las Posas Valley and Santa Clara River Valley may also pass through the proposed project area.

The project site is similar to adjacent lands and does not serve as a particular migratory pathway for any species. The large, mobile species are capable of choosing a wide variety of potential pathways, and can readily move around the site through undisturbed lands to the east and west of the site. Highly votile species such as birds are not limited by the relatively minor topographical changes associated with the site. The site also does not contain important habitat for fish or amphibians that could potentially be affected by local losses of migratory paths. Therefore, impacts to migration corridors is considered a less than significant impact.

B. RECOMMENDED CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

1. A protocol survey for California gnatcatcher shall be conducted prior to any further disturbance of coastal sage scrub vegetation. If California gnatcatcher are found to be present, then the applicant shall provide to the County of Ventura proof of an "incidental take" permit prior to the initiation of any mining within undisturbed areas. Such a permit is obtained either through the Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation process via the Army Corps of Engineers and/or through the Endangered Species Act Section 10(a)(1)(B) provisions.

2. After completion of the sand and gravel operation, at least 1 acre of pond area shall be retained within the project site. It is recommended that the existing ponds be retained at the site after completion of operations. If these ponds are not suitable for long term use because of safety reasons, then another ponded area shall be developed within the flatland portion of the southern site. The reclamation plan indicates an enclosed depression to be developed on the southern site. This could be developed as a wetland by reducing its surface area so that it retains more water and by applying a wetland seed mix that includes mulefat, willows, and cattails.

C. REFERENCES

California Department of Fish and Game (October 1999a). State and Federally Listed Endangered, Threatened, and Rare Plants of California. 16 pgs. Natural Heritage Division, Plant Conservation Program

California Department of Fish and Game (October 1999b). State and Federally Listed Endangered and Threatened Animals of California. 12 pgs. Natural Heritage Division, Natural Diversity Data Base.

California Department of Fish and Game (June 1999a). Special Plants List. 119 pgs. Natural Heritage Division, Natural Diversity Data Base.

California Department of Fish and Game (June 1999b). Special Animals. 42+ pgs.

County of Ventura (August 3, 1999). Administrative Supplement to State CEQA Guidelines for the Implementation of California Environmental Quality Act. 72 pgs.

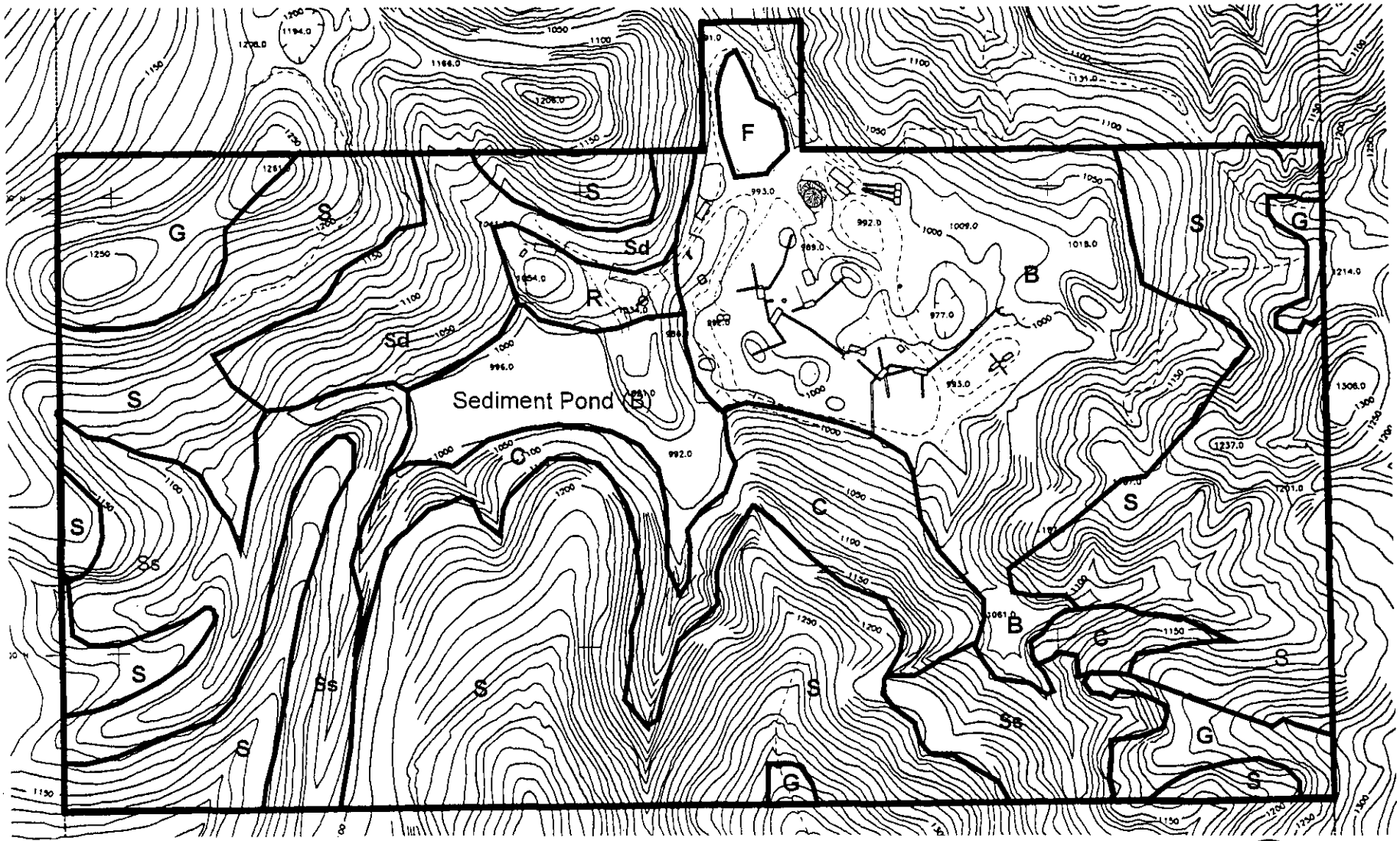
Holland, Robert F. (October 1986). Preliminary Descriptions of the Terrestrial Natural Communities of California. California Department of Fish and Game, Nongame Heritage Program. 156 pgs.

United States Fish and Wildlife Service (November 30, 1998). Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants. Special Reprint, Code of Federal Regulations, Title 50, Part 17, Subpart B.

Zeiner, D., W.F. Laudenslayer, Jr., and K.E. Mayer (May 1988). California's Wildlife. California Statewide Wildlife Habitat Relationship System, Volumes I, II, & III. California Department of Fish and Game.

Stephenson, J.R. and G.M. Calcarone, December 1999. Southern California Mountains and Foothills Assessment - Habitat and Species Conservation Issues. Pacific Southwest Research Station, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.

Ventura County Resource Management Agency, February 1998. Final Environmental Impact Report, Grimes Rock Sand and Gravel Mine, CUP-4874.



LEGEND

B	Barren/Disturbed Area	S	Coastal Sage Scrub
C	Cliff (barren)	Sd	Coastal Sage Scrub, disturbed
F	Freshwater Marsh (pond)	Ss	Coastal Sage Scrub, sparse
G	Annual Grassland		Planted Coast Live Oak
R	Ruderal Vegetation (weeds)		

NORTH

0 250 500

Scale in Feet

Existing Vegetation of Sand and Gravel Operation

Base Map Source: Best Rock Products, 2000
Data Source: Field Survey, March 20, 2000

Figure 1

Base Map Source: Best Rock Products, 2000
Data Source: Field Survey, March 20, 2000

LEGEND

- B Barren/Disturbed Area
- F Freshwater Marsh (pond)
- O Oak Woodland
- R Ruderal Vegetation (weeds)
- S Coastal Sage Scrub
- Sd Coastal Sage Scrub, disturbed

NORTH

0 150 300

Scale in Feet

Existing Vegetation of Red Rock Mining Operation

PHOTO 1. View eastward across site. Note extensive prior mining operation, sediment pond, and coastal sage scrub vegetation on upper hillsides.

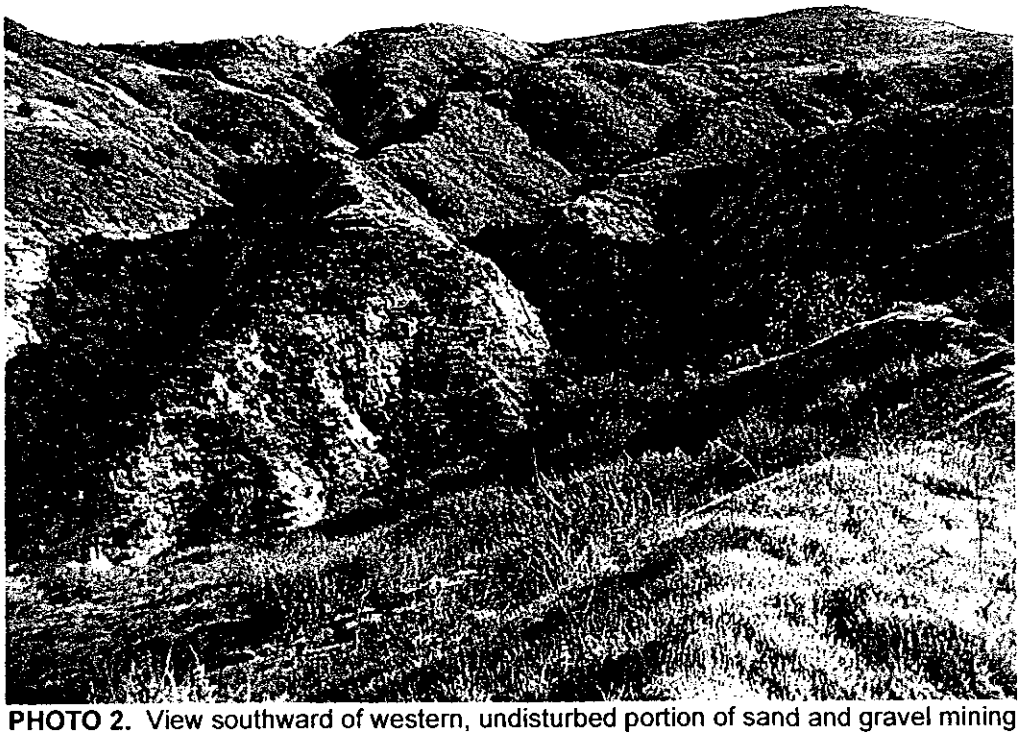


PHOTO 2. View southward of western, undisturbed portion of sand and gravel mining site. Note sparse coastal sage scrub on steep slopes, denser vegetation on upper slopes, and annual grassland in foreground.

Views of Project Site