

Ranch owner wants to raze hills near Gilroy for a gravel quarry. Tribal leaders say the land is sacred.

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Amah Mutsun Tribal Band Chairman Valentin Lopez discusses the importance of the sacred hills of Juristac/Sargent Ranch to his tribe.

Helynn Ospina/Special to The Chronicle

Drivers heading through the rural area south of Gilroy on Highway 101 will pass farm stands called the Garlic Shoppe and the Cherry Shack and then go by what looks like serene ranchland covered in oak-dotted hills.

But Sargent Ranch, a 5,300-acre property on the west side of the highway, is actually the center of a controversy gripping Santa Clara County. The owners are seeking permits to build a [403-acre sand and gravel quarry](#) that would require razing four of the hills. Opponents say the quarry would desecrate the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band's most sacred site and wildlife habitat.

"They're going to tear down four sacred mountains and turn them into a big pit in the ground, and just for money," said Valentin Lopez, chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, standing

in front of a gate barring access to the spring-green expanse tribal members know as Juristac. “That we’re even having to fight this thing or even talk about this is so troubling to us.”

Currently used for ranching and oil drilling but otherwise mostly undeveloped, Sargent Ranch encompasses two valleys, two creeks and several natural tar pits where the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band say their ancestors held their most important ceremonies. Yet the owners, Sargent Ranch Partners LLC, downplay the impact the quarry would have on cultural resources or the landscape. They say it would fuel construction projects in Santa Clara Valley that otherwise rely on sand [barged in from Canada](#) to make concrete and asphalt.



Native plant species tidy tips at Juristac/Sargent Ranch in Gilroy.

Helynn Ospina/Special to The Chronicle

“It’s sort of a farm-to-table approach,” said Verne Freeman, who is assisting Sargent Ranch Partners in the permitting process. “You produce everything locally and you don’t have the greenhouse gas impacts.”

Santa Clara County is due to release a draft environmental impact report on the proposal April 14. There will be a 30- to 60-day period when community members can comment on the report.

A final version of the document will then go to the Santa Clara County Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors for a vote.

The cities of Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and Morgan Hill [have announced opposition](#) to the project, as have several political, religious and academic groups. Most oppose it [for human rights reasons](#). The site is also known habitat for the California red-legged frog and tiger salamander, both federally threatened species, and is a wildlife corridor for a genetically distinct population of mountain lions.



Sargent Ranch in Gilroy is a sacred area of the Amah Mutsun tribe.

Helynn Ospina/Special to The Chronicle

“If we put this 300-acre pit in this really high-quality habitat, we’re going to degrade habitat for the sensitive species in the area,” said Tiffany Yap, senior scientist at the conservation group Center for Biological Diversity, who said the water-intensive operation would be harmful for the amphibians on the land.

Digging the quarry would remove 9.7 million cubic yards of topsoil and other material in order to extract about 38 million tons of sand and gravel over 30 years. A berm would hide the construction from motorists on 101. After the 30-year contract is over, the land would be re-contoured and vegetation would be replanted for wildlife habitat, said Howard Justus of Sargent

Ranch Partners LLC. He also said that 80% of the water used to wash the sand would be recycled.

“We’ve designed the quarry so it has the least impact possible for visual, for sounds, for mitigation for animal corridors and the like,” said Justus.



Amah Mutsun Tribal Band Chairman Valentin Lopez, tribal elder Nathan Olivas and tribal member Moses Carabajal at Juristac/Sargent Ranch in Gilroy.

Helynn Ospina/Special to The Chronicle

In addition, the quarry would provide an estimated 15 to 20 jobs, and the material would go to construction projects in nearby counties, where there’s an annual demand for 7.6 million tons of it per year, according to a market study.

California law required the county to consult with tribal members when creating the environmental impact report, and an ethnographic study was done that will be part of it. But the opposing sides don’t agree on the extent of cultural sites on the property, or even on the definition of one.

“There’s no artifacts, no burial grounds. There’s nothing tangible about this particular space that’s unusual or unique,” said Justus. “We’ve purposely stayed away from where there were known Indian villages.”



Amah Mutsun tribal member Moses Carabajal at Sargent Ranch in Gilroy.

Helynn Ospina/Special to The Chronicle

Yet the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, made up of descendants of survivors of the Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista missions, say they have plenty of proof of the importance of the location as well as oral history.

“A sacred site doesn’t have to have an archaeological assemblage that’s important for other people,” said Alexii Sigona, a tribal member and Ph.D. student at UC Berkeley’s Department of Environmental Science Policy and Management. “We don’t necessarily ascribe value to a village site, an archaeological site in the same way or more than an area that we know we had ceremonies.”

Amah Mutsun [ancestral territory](#) included parts of San Benito, Monterey, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. They have barely had access to Juristac, at one point called Juristac Rancho, since Spanish colonization.



Locks on an access point to Juristac/Sargent Ranch in Gilroy.

Helynn Ospina/Special to The Chronicle

Juristac means land of the Big Head, the name of ceremonies held by a spiritual leader, Kuksui. Tar springs and natural tar pits that are still in the area were used for making tools.

In 1929, tribal doctor Ascencion Solorsano de Cervantes told Smithsonian researcher John P. Harrington about the presence of medicine men near what was called Sargent Station, located near the site of the proposed quarry. Describing specific landmarks there, she recounted that Kuksui lived in trees on the hills above and came down for ceremonies, according to Smithsonian archives.

“For a number of the ceremonies, people would come from as far away as the Pomo tribes. They would come from Yosemite,” said Lopez, 70, standing on a hill on neighboring Star Creek Ranch to look down at Sargent Ranch.



Native plant species fiddle necks at Juristac/Sargent Ranch in Gilroy.

Helynn Ospina/Special to The Chronicle

Tribal member Nathan Olivas, 84, remembers going mushroom and turkey hunting in the area in the 1940s, though he didn't yet know about its cultural significance.

"I didn't know it was Indian until I was in high school," he said. "My father never talked about it."

Lopez had a similar experience. His parents always said to tell strangers he was Mexican, not Native American, because it was common for native children to be forcibly removed from their families.

Sigona, 24, Lopez's grand-nephew, said revitalization started in 2006, when the tribal members formally reengaged with land stewardship, establishing a land trust in 2013. Lopez said they would ultimately like to acquire Sargent Ranch and turn it into a cultural park.

The controversy over the land illustrates how American concepts of property rights often conflict with Native American beliefs about land stewardship as well as international laws that protect indigenous access to cultural sites, said Dana Zartner, a professor at the University of San Francisco International Studies Department who has advised the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band on international law related to their work.

“It’s really about reshaping perceptions about the meaning of lands and the meaning of rights,” she said.

Though the Amah Mutsun don’t have many domestic laws protecting them, Zartner said she thinks public opinion could make a difference in this case.

“It goes alongside these ideas of reparations, land acknowledgments,” she said. “It’s part of this movement that’s growing.”

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