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## Quarry operator seeks environmental seal of approval

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From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

*Holcim, in league with Environmental Defence, plans to establish certification standard for gravel*

First came lumber certified as environmentally friendly, then seafood. Now a move is afoot to give gravel - blasted out of open-pit mines, then hauled out using diesel-belching trucks - the green seal of approval.

In a move that will test the outer limits of the green-products concept, the Canadian unit of Holcim Ltd., the Swiss-based cement giant, and advocacy group Environmental Defence will announce Wednesday that they're establishing a certification standard for aggregates, which they claim would be the toughest in the world in setting stringent conditions on quarrying.

The effort by the company is an attempt to defuse some of the vociferous opposition from community groups that typically accompanies almost all new gravel pits being proposed in Canada, and at many existing quarries.

Even though aggregates are needed for roads and all infrastructure projects using cement, quarries are highly unpopular. It usually takes years of costly wrangling before provincial regulators or municipalities will issue approvals, if they do so at all, largely owing to opposition by neighbouring property owners over dust, noise, and landscape destruction concerns.

In the past year, Ontario regulators have rejected two proposed quarries, one in the Caledon area on the outskirts of Toronto and another near Guelph.

"We see this as shifting away from the combative nature of where the industry is with various stakeholders," says Bill Galloway, senior vice-president at Holcim (Canada) Inc., of the certification approach.

Sustainable rocks may seem like an oxymoron, given that gravel is blasted out of open pit mines, but Mr. Galloway is convinced it's possible, if quarries are placed in areas where the potential for environmental harm is minimized and operating practices avoid affecting neighbouring land owners.

"I definitely believe that you can be green," Mr. Galloway says.

Among the requirements for green gravel, the certification standard would place environmentally sensitive areas off-limits for quarries, would force companies to establish new conservation zones up to three times the size of their pits as offsets, would cut greenhouse-gas emissions, and would increase the amount of recycled aggregates they use to cut the need for virgin rocks. These requirements go well beyond current regulatory standards.

Having quarries certified under the proposed standard will lead to "measurably

greener aggregates, aggregate that is mined with much less of an impact on the landscape," contends Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defence.

He said the stipulation for companies to establish conservation reserves up to three times the size of the area they mine "is a huge step forward."

Residents who live near the actual quarries, rather than the proposed new conservation zones, might disagree. Opponents of the quarry proposed for the Caledon area, for instance, cited among their concerns increased truck traffic; potential negative effects on local aquifers and ground water; dust, dirt and reduced air quality; the introduction of heavy industry into a quiet rural residential area; and noise from blasting and quarry operations. And it's not just NIMBYism: Opponents ranged from the town of Caledon and Peel Region to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the Niagara Escarpment Commission.

Still, product certification has been a boon in forestry, where environmentalists have largely made peace with companies that were once among their biggest adversaries. The certification system is being patterned after the Forest Stewardship Council's approach to giving lumber a green seal of approval if it comes from woodlands meeting stringent environmental conditions.

Certification has worked in the forestry sector because "consumers want to know what they're getting is respectable" and companies want to make the environmental initiatives they undertake "part of [their] value proposition" for customers, says Avrim Lazar, president of the Forest Products Association of Canada.

Holcim intends to seek a green label for its 25 quarries and sand and gravel pits in Canada.

The certification process would be overseen by an independent, non-profit entity, Socially and Environmentally Responsible Aggregates, to which all quarry operators in Canada would be able to submit facilities for evaluation.

Mr. Smith says quarries that get a green stamp of approval would likely face much less opposition from environmental groups, like his own, which typically is involved in three to six fights against gravel pits at any one time. "A great amount of the sting would be taken out of this issue if this standard were broadly adopted by the industry," he contends.

The decision by a major player in the aggregate industry such as Holcim to ink a certification deal with environmentalists comes after several major regulatory setbacks for quarry companies unable to overcome environmental opposition.

Squabbling over gravel isn't just a factor in densely populated Southern Ontario. Recent fights over pits have also broke out around Calgary, Edmonton, along the Fraser River in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, and in Nova Scotia.

But it isn't clear whether having companies meet higher environmental standards would be enough to mollify quarry critics, particularly nearby residents. "Basically nobody wants one of these things close to them. They're noisy, they're dusty, they disturb the water [table]," observes Ric Holt, president of Gravel Watch Ontario, an environmental group.

What makes a rock green?

For quarries to be certified as green, under the plan put forward by Environmental Defence and Holcim Ltd., companies would have to meet dozens of exacting conditions, such as:

Staying out of environmentally sensitive lands. This would include valuable agricultural lands, such as the Niagara Peninsula's wine and tender-fruit areas, protected areas in greenbelts, significant woodlands, endangered species habitat, and provincially significant wetlands.

Creating wildlife habitat: Companies would have to create offsetting new wildlife habitat up to three times the size of their quarry lands.

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions: Existing quarries would have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 15 per cent below 1990 levels.

Recycling: Companies would have to minimize quarrying of fresh rocks through increased recycling of concrete and aggregates. This would be contingent on provinces raising standards for the recycled content of aggregate-based building materials.

Improving water: Quarry companies would have to ensure that they improve or restore the quantity and quality of groundwater and surface water.

Involving communities: Community involvement would be required in all major steps in development of the resource, including site choice, operations and rehabilitation.

*Martin Mittelstaedt*

Gravel

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