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# Scenic state park at center of Illinois frac sand fight

>> By Dan Ferber • 6/04/2012 • 1 Comment



A waterfall at Starved Rock State Park in Illinois. (Photo by Anne Hornyak via Creative Commons)

For a century, the picturesque river town of Ottawa, Illinois, has supplied sand to a nation, with several companies mining high quality silica sand from the Illinois River Valley to supply makers of glass, molds to make auto parts, paint, and other industrial products.

But what's coming to Ottawa and nearby towns in the Illinois River Valley is not ordinary sand mining, says Farley Andrews, an Ottawa-based photographer and school bus driver. It's "hypermining"—sand mining on steroids.

That's because the great frac sand rush that has engulfed Wisconsin and Minnesota is making inroads in Illinois. And right now, environmentalists say, frac sand mining threatens one of Illinois' most beloved and iconic state parks—and perhaps the entire Illinois River Valley.

"Our experience here is that there's probably no one watching and thinking and worrying about this," said Glynnis Collins, executive director of Prairie Rivers Network, a Champaign, Illinois-based river conservation group. No one knows the extent of the sand mines planned in Illinois, but Wisconsin-style frac sand mining could do serious damage to the fragile ecology of the Illinois River Valley, she said.

"I don't even know how much of that is at stake, and I fear that we won't know until it's done," Collins said.

As the natural gas industry ramps up hydrofracking operations from New York to Texas, demand rises for industrial quantities of sand. Frackers need it to prop open cracks in deep underground shale deposits, allowing natural gas to flow freely toward the surface.

The best sand for fracking has quartz grains that are relatively pure, hard enough to withstand the pressure thousands of feet below the earth, and round enough to allowing natural gas to flow around them easily, Tony Giordano, president of Kirkwood, Missouri–based Mississippi Sand.

Such sand is not common. Some of the world's best deposits occur in the Midwest, in thick sandstone formations left behind by ancient seas. And as the fracking boom has taken off, so has demand for Midwestern sand.

"This is the best sand in the world," said Annie Mwinga, a Milwaukee-based environmental engineer who works in the sand mining industry. "China wants this sand." The Midwestern sand mining industry, she said, is "going to be huge."

## A wealth of sand

U.S. frac sand production more than doubled from 2006 to 2010, the last year for which data are available, when more than 12 million tons of frac sand were produced, according to the U.S. Geological Survey [PDF].

"It's been like a gold rush," said Thomas Dolley, a commodity specialist at the U.S. Geological Survey who tracks the sand and gravel mining industry.

Most of that frac sand production is in the Midwest, Dolley said. And nowhere has the industry taken off faster than in Wisconsin. Approximately 60 frac sand mines and 30 sand-processing facilities have been built in Wisconsin, and more than 20 new mines have been proposed, according to a January 2012 report [PDF] from the state's Department of Natural Resources.

But round-grained silica sand is also abundant in much of northern and central Illinois, much of which lies over St. Peter sandstone, a deep band of sand that was deposited by an ancient sea.

In north-central Illinois, geological forces have uplifted that sandstone to the surface in a geological formation known as the LaSalle anticline, and high-quality silica sand in this area can be mined easily in open-pit mines. That's why sand mining companies like Ottawa Silica (now owned by U.S. Silica) have been part of the local economy for more than a century.

But a new mine proposed by Mississippi Sand is different, conservationists and local opponents say, and it has become a flash point in the battle to put the brakes on frac sand mining in Illinois.

The 315-acre mine site sits directly across a road from Starved Rock State Park, a 2,630-acre refuge of forested bluffs interwoven with 18 canyons that hugs the Illinois River between the cities Ottawa and LaSalle-Peru. Just 90 miles southwest of Chicago, the park attracted more than two million visitors in 2011.

"It's a beautiful jewel of a state park," Collins said—a rare oasis in a state that's mostly "plowed and paved."

## Mining sand, creating jobs

Mississippi Sand plans to blast apart the St. Peter sandstone, use earth-moving equipment to gather the sand, truck it to a barging facility three miles away on the Illinois River, and ship it to oil and gas-industry customers in states south and west, including Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas.

The mining operation would inject $9 million into the local economy, based on what the company would spend with local contractors, service companies, suppliers, utilities and more, Giordano said. And it would create 35 jobs paying $32 per hour plus benefits at the sand mine, in addition to 30 at a nearby trucking firm that will ship the sand, and at least four more loading the barges—all this in a county that's struggling with a 12 percent unemployment rate, he said.

For these reasons, the project has the strong backing of Local 150 of the International Union of Operating Engineers, which represents heavy equipment operators who would work the mines. At a May 23 public meeting in Ottawa organized by the Illinois EPA and other state agencies, several of the union's members were in attendance, wearing T-shirts saying "We support Mississippi Sand."

"We're for it because it's bringing jobs," Steve Russo, a Utica, Illinois-based union organizer, said. "Some of our guys have been out of work for two years."

Frac sand mining is "the hottest thing on the market. We just need to get it going," added Tim Waldron, a heavy equipment operator from Utica.

To get their mine going, Mississippi Sand has gone to great lengths to be a good neighbor and a good corporate citizen, Giordano said. They volunteered to build a berm and use landscaping to visually shield drivers on Illinois Route 71, also known as the Illinois River Road, which is a National Scenic Byway.

They promised to replace any water wells damaged by the sand mining, and they guaranteed the mine's neighbors, who were worried about the value of their home, 3 percent annual appreciation in their home value, or the company would make up the difference.

Merlin Calhoun points out his property's location relative to a proposed frac sand mining operation. (Photo by Dan Ferber for Midwest

Energy News)

## Sand mine on the fast track?

Regardless of the company's efforts, for two of those neighbors, Merlin and Susan Calhoun, the proposed sand mine is a nightmare–the end of their idyllic country life. The two live on a forested bluff overlooking the proposed sand mine on land that's been in Susan's family for generations. The couple have planted fruit trees—apple, pear, peach, and cherry–on the property. They keep honeybees and sell the honey through their business, the Starved Rock Honey Company.

Merlin's voice quiets with awe when he talks about the 80-foot wooded canyon on their property, complete with a waterfall.

"When I go out at night, I can see every star. I hear the sound of barred owls. It's the sound of country."

The mine will bring the sound of blasting multiple times a day, plus more than 100 trucks a day rolling to and from the mine, and bright lights each night.

"We feel it's like a snake that's been let into the Garden of Eden," Merlin Calhoun said.

Mine opponents like the Calhouns and Farley Andrews argue that the mining will disturb wildlife in Starved Rock State Park across the road and destroy a rare salt marsh on the mine property that may house two endangered plants. They say it will diminish the scenic value of the Illinois River Road and harm the county's tourism industry.

Environmental groups and local opponents say that LaSalle County officials fast-tracked the mine permitting, while excluding public participation.

For example, the county's Zoning Board of Appeals unanimously approved a zoning variance for the mine in December, despite being presented with a petition from more than 1,000 people opposing the mine.

The LaSalle County Board approved the zoning variance three weeks later, then declined in March to ask the state for a public meeting on the mine, despite being urged to do so by Illinois Lieutenant Governor Sheila Simon. Under Illinois law, only the county that houses the disputed site can request such a meeting.

"We don't think the LaSalle County Board should be able to [make policy] for all of the state of Illinois," said Tess Wendel, clean water organizer for the Illinois Sierra Club.

Mississippi Sand still needs permits from both the air- and water-pollution divisions of the Illinois EPA, which must consult with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency to preserve culturally important artifacts. (The Starved Rock area is rich in Native American artifacts, including many that date back thousands of years.)

But it's the mining permit from the state Department of Natural Resources, which covers the mine's reclamation plans, that's "the big Kahuna," Wendel said. That's because state rules direct the agency to consider both short and long-term impacts of the proposed mine on vegetation, wildlife, land use, land values, air pollution, water pollution, and even the local economy and tax base.

"We're hopeful we'll have the permits by the end of the summer and we'll have the operation going by January 1, 2013," Giordano said.

## Beginnings of a boom?

Mine opponents still hope otherwise, but their hopes are dimming. In March, the Sierra Club, Prairie Rivers Network and several dozen local opponents wrote to Marc Miller, director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, with a detailed argument against approving the mine.

"We'd like to see the [salt marsh] protected," Collins said. "We want to see Starved Rock State Park protected even from nuisance things that would disturb visitors in the park."

But Collins said that since sand mines like Mississippi Sand's operation operate without much federal or state regulation (as compared to coal mines, for instance), it is harder for groups like hers to intervene legally to stop them.

Back in LaSalle County, another local mining company, Unimin, has recently added prime farmland to its property, donated $400,000 to the village of Utica, and persuaded that city to annex the property, Martin said. LaSalle County has strong zoning protections in place to preserve prime farmland, but the village of Utica agreed to give Unimin the zoning variation it needs to mine the land for frac sand.

Martin, the Ottawa lawyer, said that sand mining companies are discreetly shopping around LaSalle County, offering more than twice the going rate for prime farmland.

Collins and other environmentalists fear that moves like these signal the beginning of a boom that could threaten natural areas, particularly those in river valleys, throughout northern and central Illinois. These areas serve as buffers that provide wildlife habitat and filter pollution, keeping it out of rivers. And in Illinois, Collins said, "the natural lands along rivers are the last vestiges of nature we have in the state."

*Dan Ferber is an Indianapolis-based freelancer whose work has appeared in* Wired, Popular Science, Science, *and other outlets. He's the co-author, with the late Paul Epstein, MD, of Changing Planet, Changing Health: How the Climate Crisis Threatens Our Health and What We Can Do about It.*

**Tags:** frac sand, Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin

Comments (1)

This is incredibly sad. I grew up in Illinois and spent school field trips and many family outings at Starved Rock State Park. It has huge historical significance to the local people, especially the indigenous native tribes, and is really one of the only places of undisturbed nature in that part of the state. In addition to the disturbances to visitors in the park during construction and the potential loss of wildlife, the long-term effects of this type of mining – specifically how it affects the stability of the ground, bedrock, and aquifers – should be more seriously considered by local and state officials.

By **Alison** on Jun 4, 2012

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