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P R E S S R E L E A S E

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For more information:

Craig Tucker, *Litigant and Spokesman, Karuk Tribe*, cell 916-207-8294
Glen Spain, *PCFFA*, 541-521-8655 cell
Mike Thornton *The Sierra Fund* 530-262-7335 cell

GOVERNOR SIGNS BILL BANNING IN STREAM DREDGE MINING FOR GOLD

Ban will remain in place until new dredge mining rules protective of fish are developed

Sacramento, CA – Today Governor Schwarzenegger signed a bill to temporarily ban the destructive form of recreational gold mining known as suction dredging. Other forms of mining are not affected. With its signing, the bill places an immediate moratorium on all suction dredge mining until the California Department of Fish and Game develops and implements new suction dredge regulations that are protective of fisheries and water quality. Introduced by North coast Senator Pat Wiggins (D-Santa Rosa), the bill attracted broad bi-partisan support and passed both houses of the legislature with a 2/3 majority.

The signing marked a major victory by a diverse coalition of Tribes, fishermen, and conservation groups from around the state. It comes a week after an Alameda County Superior Court ordered a moratorium on the issuance of new dredge permits pending resolution of a complaint charging that tax payer money is illegally subsidizing issuance of dredging permits by the California Department of Fish and Games (DFG).

“We’ve been working to protect our fisheries from destructive mining practices for 150 years,” said Bob Goodwin, Karuk Self Governance Coordinator. “This law requires the state use the best available science in determining where and when hobby miners can operate their dredges without harming our fisheries. Until then, no dredging will be allowed in California.”

According to California Trout’s Tom Wesloh, ““California’s rivers and streams are suffering from increasing degradation, and the endangered and threatened fish species face ever more obstacles to survival. Suction dredging disturbs spawning beds of trout, steelhead and salmon. Healthy spawning beds are essential to the long-term survival of these species.”

Groups hope that at the end of the rule making process, the size of dredges will be limited and critical habitats and spawning areas for threatened species will be off limits while allowing dredgers access to areas less vital for the survival of at-risk species.

This recent struggle over dredge mining started in 1997 when Coho salmon were added to the state and federal endangered species list. At that point California Fish and Game Department regulations required that mining rules be re-examined. They were not. In 2005, the Karuk Tribe sued the Department which admitted that a rule change was in order.

“In 2006 we actually proposed some modest restrictions limited to the Klamath Basin. The Department agreed, but the New 49ers and other local mining groups intervened and blocked implementation of the settlement,” explains Goodwin.

The judge did order the Department to go through a public rule making process consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) by June 2008. However, the Department failed to comply with the court order..

“We kept trying to get the money in the Department’s budget, but the New 49ers kept lobbying against it. We had little recourse other than legislating the ban to protect our fishery,” concluded Goodwin.

Now the moratorium is statewide and protects not just Northern California Coho, but at-risk species from coastal rivers to high Sierra streams to the few remaining natural waterways in southern California. “Our native fish, frogs, and other at-risk species are declining statewide,” explains Steve Evans, Conservation Director of Friends of the River. “Banning dredge mining is not a silver bullet solution for protecting these species, but it’s a good start.”

Other groups see dredging as a public health issue because it remobilizes toxic mercury left behind by 19th century gold miners. According to Elizabeth (Izzy) Martin, Executive Director of the Sierra Fund, “Dredges suck up mercury buried in river sediment and remobilizes that mercury in our river and streams. This creates a significant health threat to subsistence fishermen, pregnant women and children as well as wildlife.”

Fishermen have taken on miners to preserve jobs. According to Glen Spain, Northwest Regional Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations, a major trade organization representing commercial fishing families, “Commercial fishermen are out of work again this year due to the fishing ban put in place in response to salmon declines from habitat destruction and flow loss. Everyone whose activities harm salmon habitat must share the conservation burden, including the suction dredgers.”

All the groups praised Governor Schwarzenegger for signing the bill. “We call on the Governor to seize every opportunity to protect and rebuild our great salmon fishery and the economies throughout California these fish have supported,” concluded Spain.

Although the moratorium does spare rivers from dredges, other forms of mining are unaffected and miners will still have access to their claims. McCracken, President of the New 49ers on his website, “the other types of prospecting or mining that we do are not being challenged. These include panning, sniping & Vack-mining, sluicing & high-banking, booming, electronic prospecting and other types of prospecting that do not use a suction nozzle within an active stream, river or creek. So SB 670 does not affect most of the activity which we do, including our group weekend projects.” (<http://www.goldgold.com/newsletterlatest.htm>)

What is a Dredge?

Suction dredges are powered by gas or diesel engines that are mounted on floating pontoons in the river. Attached to the engine is a powerful vacuum hose which the dredger uses to suction up the gravel and sand (sediment) from the bottom of the river. The material passes through a sluice box where heavier gold particles can settle into a series of riffles. The rest of the gravel is simply dumped back into the river. Often this reintroduces mercury left over from historic mining operations to the water column, threatening communities downstream and getting into the human food chain. Depending on size, location and density of these machines they can turn a clear running mountain stream into a murky watercourse unfit for swimming.

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Editor’s note: for a picture of a suction dredge in action, email request to ctucker@karuk.us

Also see a dredge in action on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11qwdzQ4fzI>