

# Meadow Vista river's mercury removal project seeks state, federal dollars

**Gus Thomson, Auburn Journal, 9-27-10**

The gold in the foothills of Auburn led to a toxic legacy that the Nevada Irrigation District is now attempting to reverse.

Encouraged by results of sample dredging at the Chevreux Aggregates property alongside Bear River upstream from Combie Reservoir in Meadow Vista, the district is now looking for state and federal funding to help pay for an ambitious mercury extraction program expected to cost \$9 million.

Tim Crough, irrigation district general manager, said plans are to remove the mercury as part of an ongoing operation to remove gravel and sediment from the Bear River and the reservoir. If left untouched, the sediment would wash into the reservoir and take up valuable water-storage space, he said.

A demonstration last year by Canadian-based Pegasus Earth Sensing Corp. showed that five pounds of mercury could be removed for every five tons of gravel that was cleaned.

Crough said the district's project is being viewed as a model for other efforts to remove Gold Rush-era mercury from Sierra waterways. Mercury, a byproduct of the gold-extraction process in California from the 1840s into the early 20th century, continues to rest at the bottom of countless rivers and streams throughout the Gold Country. Eating fish from mercury-laden waters leads to development delays in fetuses, infants and children.

One potential source of funding could be coming from state voter-approved safe drinking water and water quality bond passed in 2006. The district's board voted earlier this month to respond to a Sierra Nevada Conservancy invitation to apply for a grant of up to \$1 million to fund the mercury removal project near the mouth of Combie Reservoir.

The \$1 million could be used for initial site improvements and restoration work, Crough said.

With support from U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco, the district is also in the running for a \$3 million congressional appropriation next year.

At Wednesday's board meeting in Grass Valley, directors learned from General Manager Ron Nelson that the district has been invited to take part and help sponsor a conference Nov. 8 and Nov. 9 being planned by the Nevada City-based Sierra Fund. The event, titled "Reclaiming the Sierra: Gold Country Community Summit on Mining Impacts," will be held at Miners Foundry in Nevada City.

Nelson said the Sierra Fund has been very helpful to the district in its Bear River mercury removal project.