

# Dredge miners hear giant sucking sound

**Delaine Fragnoli, Plumas County News, 6-8-11**

The controversial practice of suction dredge mining may be banned permanently in California thanks to recently passed budget language. Committees in both houses of the California Legislature passed the language last month. The language awaits final approval as part of the state's overall budget package.

The language would extend the current moratorium on the practice for five years, or until the Department of Fish and Game can come up with a plan to mitigate all the environmental impacts and a way to pay for program costs, estimated to be at least \$2 million a year, a figure mining advocates dispute.

But the budget language also prohibits the department from spending any money to develop such a plan. It is "Catch-22 language," DFG Director John McCamman told the Sacramento Bee last week.

The agency did get funding to enforce the moratorium, which went into effect in 2009, when the Legislature passed a bill temporarily banning suction dredge mining on all California lakes and rivers until a court-ordered environmental review could be completed.

Mining advocates say DFG has already spent \$1.5 million preparing its environmental document, which it released for public comment in late February, and that money will be wasted if the effort is de-funded. At the time the agency said it expected to issue its final study and decision in fall 2011.

Proponents of suction dredge mining, expecting the ban to be lifted by the end of the year, now say a five-year moratorium will kill the gold-mining industry and cost the state \$23 – \$70 million annually and put 4,000 people out of their jobs.

State Senator Ted Gaines, who represents Plumas County, issued a statement June 2 in which he said, "Legislative tricks are putting an entire industry at risk. This is unfair to the thousands of miners, their families and the businesses that depend on suction dredge mining for their livelihoods."

But mining critics contend those numbers are vastly inflated, especially compared to the economic interests of tribes, environmentalists and recreational and commercial fishermen who claim they are negatively impacted by the practice's environmental damage. In 2009, DFG issued 4,000 suction dredging permits, 112 in Plumas. Many went to part-time miners. The agency sells 2 million fishing licenses a year.

"California is in the midst of an historic financial crisis. Taxpayers can no longer afford to subsidize this environmentally destructive hobby," said Leaf Hillman, director of the Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources, in a press release. The current moratorium stems from a lawsuit, spearheaded by the Karuk tribe, which argued that the practice was harming fish habitat by churning up pollutants, such as mercury, deposited in streambeds by a century and a half of mining activity.

Miners claim DFG's environmental study showed that suction dredge mining did not harm fish. "The Legislature didn't like what it (the study) said so they are moving the goalposts on the miners," said Gaines.

The study concluded that continuing the current moratorium on suction dredge mining would be the best thing for the environment.

The next preferable alternative would be to cut the number of suction dredge permits by more than half — from

an average of 3,650 over the past 15 years to 1,500 annually — while limiting dredging to 14 days a year for each permit holder and reducing the allowable nozzle size from 8 inches to 4.

The ban has some miners headed across the border to Oregon. But the same showdown is about to unfold there: Environmental group Rogue Riverkeeper has sued the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality over what the group calls lax oversight of suction dredge miners.