

Big Cut Mine owner faces gold-mining charges

Don Thompson, Associated Press, 2-10-12

SACRAMENTO -- The owner of a Sierra Nevada mine who state and local officials say is running a major illegal gold-mining operation surrendered Thursday to face 14 criminal charges of operating without permits and polluting a creek.

Joseph Hardesty also faces state fines of nearly \$900,000. He was booked into El Dorado County Jail on the charges, which include four felonies, and was being held in lieu of \$75,000 bond.

His attorney, William Brewer, says Hardesty turned himself in after investigators from the district attorney's office searched for him at his mother's home and the home of his partner in the Big Cut Mine, near Placerville.

He surrendered a day after the Associated Press published a story about the mine, which is in the Sierra foothills between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe, and his three-year battle with authorities.

"It's unfortunate that our government has decided in this case to take away our liberties and our rights without adequate process," said Brewer, of San Diego. "Joe really is a very honorable person and I just wish things were different."

He denies his client is mining gold, saying he is operating a sand and gravel business to complement another he owns in Sacramento County. State and local officials say they have evidence and statements indicating the site is being mined for gold at a time when gold is hovering near \$1,700 an ounce.

Hardesty, 54, had promised to surrender last week but failed to appear. The sheriff's department said Hardesty turned himself at its office in Placerville about 11:30 a.m. and was taken to jail without incident.

Brewer said investigators had looked for his client everywhere except where he was- his home in Elk Grove, south of Sacramento.

Hardesty contends that he has a historic right to operate the Big Cut Mine on nearly 150 acres he bought seven years ago. But local authorities and the State Mining and Geology Board disagree.

On top of the mining board's fines, El Dorado County charged Hardesty with mining and grading without permits, working despite stop orders, releasing sediment into Weber Creek, violating zoning laws, and using hazardous materials without proper permits.