

Amador joins push to restore suction-dredge gold mining

Roger Phelps, Amador Ledger-Dispatch, 1-29-10

Amador County supervisors had words of encouragement on Tuesday for aficionados of the gold-mining practice known as suction dredging.

Suction-dredge mining, long regulated under seasonal and geographic criteria only, has been under a legislated moratorium since August, pending environmental review. The move came over concerns about the state's permitting process, particularly regarding the harm suction dredging may do to fish-spawning grounds. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger came under pressure from mining interests to veto Senate Bill 670 that installed the moratorium.

The Department of Fish and Game expects the review will be finished by late summer 2011, but opponents of the legislation are still mounting pressure to suspend it. Economic arguments on behalf of subsistence miners, mining-tourism operations and manufacturers of mining equipment have figured largely into the push.

"It's a big industry," said District 4 Supervisor Louis Boitano.

Some 60 people gathered to urge supervisors toward a resolution against SB 670 and to stand and cheer when a 5-0 vote came for the resolution.

Resident Sheldon Rodman said, half-jokingly, "Maybe it's time for me to take (dredging) up, too - maybe I'll get myself arrested."

The Rodman family runs the Roaring Camp facility on the Mokelumne River, which attracts both panners and dredgers of gold.

Residents of both El Dorado and Calaveras counties attended to weigh in behind suction dredging. Several miners said they were certain that suction dredging did no harm to spawning grounds. Others argued that because dams block the chinook salmon from reaching hereditary spawning grounds on the Mokelumne River, the moratorium should be lifted just for the upper Mokelumne.

Still others complained of lost income from what they said had been, on good days, a profitable activity.

Miner Dick Reynolds said a good day with his suction dredge could bring him some \$3,000 worth of gold. The price of gold currently is more than \$1,000 an ounce.

The county's resolution will reach Schwarzenegger, various legislators, the Regional Council of Rural Counties, the California State Association of Counties and the boards of supervisors in each Mother Lode county.

Despite miners' protests, some studies have indicated harm to salmon-spawning grounds from suction-dredge mining.

"Many more pre-emergent chinook salmon were lost from redds (spawning nests) on dredge tailings compared with redds on natural substrates," found researchers Bret Harvey and Thomas Lisle in 1999, while working out of the Pacific Southwest Research Station run by the U.S. Forest Service in Arcata in Humboldt County.