

Cascadia Wildlands

we like it wild.

April 15, 2013

Cascadia Wildlands testimony in support of SB 838 and SB 401 Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee

Good afternoon Chair Dingfelder and members of the committee:

My name is Josh Laughlin. I am the Campaign Director of Eugene-based Cascadia Wildlands, a regional non-profit conservation organization representing nearly 10,000 members and supporters. Cascadia Wildlands educates, agitates, and inspires a movement to protect and restore Cascadia's wild ecosystems. We envision vast old-growth forests, rivers full of wild salmon, wolves howling in the backcountry, and vibrant communities sustained by the unique landscapes of the Cascadia bioregion.

Wild salmon are a unifying force for Oregonians. They help sustain what is left of our commercial fishing fleet, they fertilize our lands and waters, they feed our people. They help define Oregon. Addressing root causes of wild salmon decline is a primary interest of our organization. Cascadia Wildlands is grateful for the leadership of this committee to advance SB 838 and SB 401, two bills that would curb destructive suction dredge mining to protect our clean water legacy and our ailing salmon runs in Oregon.

Cascadia Wildlands finds it ironic that we take drastic measures to protect and restore our salmon populations — like periodically shutting down the dwindling commercial ocean fishery, prohibiting logging near streams, shooting predating sea lions at Bonneville Dam, and spending tens of millions of public and private dollars every year to enhance spawning and rearing habitat — yet with little oversight, we permit hobby miners to violently vacuum up sensitive river bottoms in critical salmon streams while looking for gold flecks.

The scientific research on the impacts of suction dredge mining overwhelmingly suggests the practice is directly harming juvenile fishes, their spawning habitat, their food sources and can resuspend metals toxic to humans and fishes, like mercury, that has settled in our river bottoms since the last Gold Rush.¹ The science must guide decision making, and the legislature now has before it the contemporary scientific literature on the impacts suction dredge mining on salmon and watershed health.

¹ Effects of Suction Dredge Mining on Oregon Fishes and Their Aquatic Habitats. April 2013. Oregon Chapter American Fisheries Society.

The state of California undertook the most extensive literature review on suction dredge mining and its impacts prior to issuing a moratorium on the practice in 2009². An unintended consequence of the moratorium was a major spike in suction dredging in Oregon. Our iconic waterways and wild salmon strongholds like the Chetco, Illinois, Rogue and South Umpqua have become ground zero for this destructive practice. With gold at nearly \$1,500/oz and the moratorium still in place in California, it is expected that suction dredging in Oregon will continue to expand unless action is taken.

These are world-class river systems that people from all around the world come to experience — rafting, hiking, camping, and fishing for steelhead and salmon. A recent economic impact analysis performed by ECONorthwest showed that river-based recreation on the Wild and Scenic Rogue River, which includes rafting, fishing, hiking, and jetboat tours, accounted for not less than \$30 million in total economic output each year, including \$15.4 million in personal income, and 445 full- and part-time jobs.³ Safeguarded waterways are big business in Oregon.

Prior to the California legislature enacting SB 670, which ultimately put a moratorium on suction dredge mining, the Western Division of the American Fisheries Society, the foremost fisheries experts in the country, submitted testimony that concluded:

Last year, all salmon fishing was banned along the Pacific coast of California and southern Oregon. The ban is expected again this year. These bans and the greatly reduced salmon populations that preceded them are negatively affecting the livelihoods of thousands of commercial fishermen, fish processors and charter boat operators. In addition, scientific fish collecting permits are highly restricted to protect listed salmon. It seems irrational to restrict scientific research, jeopardize and entire fishery, ban commercial fish, and increase risk to listed fish while allowing a recreational hobby. This is a classic case of why CDFG would be wise to use the precautionary principle to guide decisions. That is, to err on the side of the fish before they are forever extirpated.⁴

The Oregon Chapter of the American Fisheries Society recently weighed in to the Oregon legislature, concluding:

We encourage that suction dredge mining be prohibited or greatly reduced where sensitive fish stocks utilize reaches for spawning or where other sensitive life history stages are present.⁵

There is a significant opportunity right now to ensure a legacy of clean water and wild salmon in Oregon. Cascadia Wildlands supports SB 401, which will direct the state of Oregon to review and

² Horizon Water and Environment [HWE]. 2009. Suction Dredge Permitting Program. Literature Review on the Impacts of Suction Dredge Mining in California.

³ ECONorthwest. 2009. Regional Economic Impacts of Recreation on the Wild and Scenic Rogue River.

⁴ Western Division of American Fisheries Society. March 2009. Letter to the California Legislature.

⁵ Oregon Chapter American Fisheries Society. April 2013. Effects of Suction Dredge Mining on Oregon Fishes and Their Aquatic Habitats.

recommend new river stretches to be included into the State Scenic Waterway system which has not been updated in 25 years. We also encourage the legislature to support SB 838, which will enact a five-year moratorium on suction dredge mining in state-designated Essential Salmonid Habitat. However, our preference is that the moratorium not be lifted until a suction dredge mining permit system is in place that has meaningful and enforceable sideboards that truly protect our wild salmon heritage and clean water resource. It would be a great tragedy if when the moratorium were lifted in 2018, we reverted back to the status quo. Thank you for your time today.

Sincerely,

Josh Laughlin
Cascadia Wildlands