



April 14, 2015

RE: Testimony of the Center for Biological Diversity concerning Senate Bill 830 relating to mining for precious metals in and near streams

Honorable members of the Oregon Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity (“Center”), a non-profit conservation group with more than 825,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and their habitats. The Center and its members across Oregon are concerned about the harmful effects of suction dredging on water quality, fish populations, and the environment across Oregon.

The Center supports strong restrictions on suction dredge mining in order to protect water quality and fisheries in Oregon. Suction dredging is a method of gold mining that sucks up sediment beneath a river with a vacuum motor. After filtering out the gold through a sluice box, the remaining materials are dumped back into the river.

Suction Dredging Has Negative Effects Water Quality

Suction dredging process poses significant risks to Oregon’s waterways and water supplies. The process unearths sediment, historic mercury deposits, and heavy metals that have settled in river beds. These mobilized contaminants pollute water supplies and heavy metals, such as mercury, bio-accumulates and spread throughout the food chain. The threat is so severe that the State Water Resources Control Board of California has urged a permanent ban because of the widespread impacts on the water supplies of that state.ⁱ

Suction Dredging Has Negative Effects on Fisheries and Aquatic Resources

Suction dredge mining also poses significant risks to Oregon’s fisheries. The Oregon Chapter of the American Fisheries Society has found that even with best management practices suction dredge mining has significant effects on sensitive aquatic species like salmon by introducing toxic mercury and disrupting the river bed where they spawn.ⁱⁱ Suction dredging also directly kills insects, fish eggs, and amphibians when they are sucked into the dredge. Dredging often fills the spaces between rocks with silt and sand, damaging habitats for salmon reproduction and insects that are the base of the aquatic food chain.

A New Permitting System is Essential

A robust permitting system that reduces the threats posed by suction dredge mining is essential to protect important waterways and fisheries resources and should include, at a minimum, the following components:

- A cap on suction dredge mining permits is necessary to stem the increase in mining in Oregon, which has increased since California enacted a ban on suction dredge mining.
- Mining must be prohibited in environmentally sensitive areas such as those containing habitat for sensitive species such as bull trout, lamprey, mollusks, and essential salmon habitat.
- Permit fees must be high enough to cover the full costs of the administration and enforcement of the program. Legislative analysis of a permit fee structure similar to Oregon found that state agencies paid \$1.5 million annually to subsidize the program because permit revenue did not cover the program costs.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Mining along river banks and in riparian areas adjacent to streams and rivers must also be regulated in order to protect water quality and aquatic resources.
- Mining should be prohibited in areas where it would undermine Oregon's substantial investment in salmon habitat restoration.

Thank you for your consideration,



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ⁱ Letter to Charlton H. Bonham, Director-California Department of Fish and Wildlife, from Thomas Howard, Executive Director-State Water Resources Control Board (March 11, 2013) available at pages 36-38 of <https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=63843&inline=1>

ⁱⁱ EFFECTS OF SUCTION DREDGE MINING ON OREGON FISHES AND AQUATIC HABITATS, Oregon Chapter American Fisheries Society (April 2013) available at <http://orafs.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/2013-ORAFS-Suction-Dredge-Mining-Impacts-FINAL1.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bill Analysis, AB 120, California State Assembly (June 14, 2011) available at http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/11-12/bill_asm/ab_0101-0150/ab_120_cfa_20110614_174820_asm_floor.html