



ORCA: Oregon Coast Alliance
Protecting the Oregon Coast

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February 2, 2017

Oregon Legislature
Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee

Re: SB 3, Suction-Dredge Mining
Sent via Email: senr.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov

Dear Chair Dembrow and Members of the Committee,

Oregon Coast Alliance is an Oregon nonprofit corporation whose mission is protection of coastal natural resources and maintaining livable communities.

We write to you today in strong support of SB 3, which would restrict suction-dredge mining for gold in sensitive Oregon rivers and streams. Though often touted as merely “recreational,” in fact suction-dredging is highly destructive. It involves essentially vacuuming riverbeds via use of a hose attached to a floating motorized dredge. It frequently smothers critical spawning gravels for salmon via the discharge plume of fine sediment, and can release legacy mercury in stream sediments.

Several of the most popular suction-dredging rivers are on the south coast, especially the Rogue, the Illinois and their tributaries. The Rogue is a fantastically important salmon river. The 2009 EcoNorthwest study *The Economic Value of Rogue River Salmon* identified an annual economic benefit of non-use value from Rogue River of more than \$1.5 **billion**. In addition, commercial fishing provides \$1.4 million benefit annually, and sport fishing \$16 million annually in economic benefits. The Rogue River is the heart and soul of the Gold Beach and surrounding area economy – nothing is more important than the Rogue River system’s ecological health.

SB 3 would establish a regulatory framework to limit suction-dredging. It would also end the moratorium currently in place, required by prior legislation. This bill is the result of years’ work by stakeholders and state agencies. In 2013 the initial bill, SB 838, established temporary regulatory reform and a moratorium if a longterm regulatory framework was not put in place. It also established a study group to determine the best regulations to protect river and stream resources. The study group did not reach consensus, but its suggestions were incorporated into the 2016 legislation introduced by Sen. Bates. The 2016 bill failed to pass due to the short session.

In January 2016 the moratorium went into effect, which barred suction-dredging in streams that support water flow into critical salmon, steelhead and bull trout areas. Without further legislation, it will expire in 2021.

SB 3 creates a permit system to allow suction dredging on non-sensitive waterways while protecting the vulnerable habitat streams for salmonids, bull trout and lamprey. SB 3 is not a ban on all suction-dredging, but it recognizes that Oregon has a priority to restore salmon habitat, on which the state has spent hundreds of millions of dollars statewide, including the coast. Suction-dredging poses great risks to the health of native streams and fish. Through 2019 the moratorium will continue to apply to upland mining, but after that, it will be controlled under DOGAMI permitting processes. The moratorium will also continue through 2019 for instream mining above the lowest extent of spawning habitat and to tributaries for salmonids, bull trout and lamprey. This gives the regulatory agencies the time to put the new regulatory framework into place.

SB 3 creates the *permanent* regulatory framework for a consolidated DEQ permits system. Permits would be required for each suction-dredging operation. Dredging would not be allowed in several categories of highly important streams, including Scenic Waterways, streams flowing through State Parks and Federal wilderness areas, National Monuments and Federal administrative protective designations, as well as Native reservations or tribal trust lands. The permits will have additional restrictions to prohibit moving rocks and woody debris, limit noise and protect drinking water.

Protecting Oregon's rivers is central to the south coast economy and its salmon-rich rivers, most especially the Rogue system. Suction-dredging has been increasing in Oregon due to restrictions in California, and Oregon needs to step up to the plate to protect our salmon and fragile rivers from this destructive practice. Under this bill, it will be allowed only where it causes minimal ecological harm. ORCA urges the members of the Committee to vote **in support** of SB 3.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Cameron La Follette

Cameron La Follette
Executive Director