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Regional

Groups File Petition to Limit Gold Mining to Save Struggling Fisheries

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Sacramento, CA Jan. 7, 2009 - The Karuk Tribe, California Trout, and Friends of the North Fork have formally petitioned California Fish and Game to restrict the controversial gold mining technique known as suction dredge mining. The groups' call to limit the recreational mining technique comes as California faces the worst fisheries collapse in history.

The petition was immediately supported by the Tsi-Akim Maidu Tribe, the Sierra Fund, and PCFFA.

"Last April, the state and federal government took unprecedented emergency actions to completely close California's coast to recreational and commercial salmon fishing, something that is causing severe economic harm to businesses and communities," said Glen Spain, Northwest Regional Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations. "That is why it is critical for California Fish and Game to act now to limit recreational suction dredge mining operations and protect threatened and endangered species like coho salmon."

The groups want Department of Fish and Game Director Don Koch to use his authority to implement immediate emergency restrictions on where and when suction dredging can take place - the same authority used to restrict recreational and commercial fishing when fish runs are low.

Suction dredges are powered by gas or diesel engines that are mounted on floating pontoons in the river. Attached to the engine is a powerful vacuum hose which the dredger uses to suction up the gravel and sand (sediment) from the bottom of the river. The material passes through a sluice box where heavier gold particles can settle into a series of riffles. The rest of the gravel and potentially toxic sediment is simply dumped back into the river. Depending on size, location and density of these machines they can turn a clear running mountain stream into a murky watercourse unfit for swimming.

"Dredging disturbs spawning gravels and kills salmon eggs and immature lamprey that reside in the gravel for up to seven years before maturing. In a system like the Klamath where salmon can be stressed due to poor water quality, having a dredge running in the middle of the stream affects the fishes ability to reach their spawning grounds," according to Toz Soto, lead fisheries biologist for the Karuk Tribe.

In addition, dredging reintroduces toxic mercury into the environment. According to Izzy Martin, Director of the Sierra Fund, "There is a lot of mercury settled on the bottom of these rivers as the result of gold mining operations in the 1800's. Dredging reintroduces mercury to the stream creating a toxic hazard for fish and people."

Exposure to mercury can lead to mental retardation and birth defects.

These groups have been working for years to limit suction dredging in order to protect the most important habitats for spawning coho, green sturgeon, and lamprey. Currently the Department of Fish and Game is revising (DFG) its regulations in compliance with a 2006 court order but the funding to perform the necessary CEQA hearings may disappear from the budget in the wake of the current budget impasse. At any rate the rule making could take years and groups say that the protective measures are needed immediately.

Fish and Game oversees suction dredge permits at a significant financial loss as mining fees fail to cover expenses. According to petitioners, this amounts to spending \$1.25 million per year to subsidize the destruction of California fisheries by gold mining hobbyists. Many of these hobby miners are from out of state as California's mining laws are less restrictive than those of neighboring states.

"It's absurd that in the midst of the state's worst financial crisis that we are subsidizing the destruction of our fisheries for the sake of recreational dredge mining. Tax payer dollars are being used to kill fish and the jobs they provide," added Spain.

In California, fishermen buy 2.4 million fishing licenses each year. The sportfishing industry supports a total of 43,000 jobs amounting to \$1.3 billion in wages and salaries annually. Fishing equipment sales total over \$2.4 billion per year. By comparison, DFG only issues 3,000 permits for suction dredging each year. "The 2.4 million Californians that buy fishing licenses every year expect the Governor to protect both our natural resources as well as our rural economies," said Spain.

For the Karuk Tribe the threat is even greater. "Suction dredge mining is nothing more than recreational genocide. The first gold rush killed more than half our people in 10 years. This modern gold rush continues to kill our fish and our culture," says Leaf Hillman of the Karuk Tribe.

"While we cannot harvest enough salmon for our ceremonies or to meet our families' food needs, miners are allowed to rip and tear our river bottoms to shreds. We need California Fish and Game to take a stand with Native People and the 2.4 million anglers in California - not 3,000 recreational gold miners," added Hillman.

Fish and Game Don Koch will have to consider the groups' petition to limit mining and make a ruling before the end of the month.