

MOTORIZED MINING MISMANAGED

"Panning is friendly mining, as far as it goes," says George Sexton of Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center (KS Wild), "but it's not the most common form of mining." In southern Oregon, where KS Wild monitors environmental issues on public lands, Sexton says, "You'll see more bear than you'll see miners panning for gold."

The more problematic mining that Sexton deals with is a practice called "suction dredging," which he says is causing harm to fish populations in the rivers of southern Oregon and northern California where gold is found.

In suction dredging, a diver in a wetsuit swims along the riverbed with a large suction hose powered by a gasoline engine that floats on a raft or pontoon. The hose sucks up the sediment from the riverbed and the miners then separate the gold from the other sediments using a sluice box. Larger gold nuggets settle out, but smaller bits of gold must be extracted through other means.

According to the Sierra Fund's document "Mining's Toxic Legacy," suction dredgers often encounter a gold-mercury amalgam in their mining. The suction dredging process not only re-suspends the mercury in the water, some of which was left there as a result of older mining operations, but some miners, after treating the mercury to release the gold, pour the toxin back into the river, onto the ground or into sewage systems. Sexton says other toxic results of mining include arsenic and cyanide.

Suction dredging is practiced in Oregon and California's Wild and Scenic Rivers and in Wilderness Areas, Sexton says. It damages water quality as well as critical habitat for threatened coho salmon, he says. Opponents to suction dredging point out that low salmon numbers have caused commercial salmon fishing to be stopped on Oregon and California's coasts, but that



A suction dredge

recreational suction dredging has been allowed to continue. Miners argue that they are actually removing mercury from the rivers, making them cleaner, and creating, not destroying, salmon habitat.

The 1872 mining law, called the General Mining Act, that allows environmentally-unsound mining practices to continue on public lands "was written in a different era," Sexton says. "Exploration and exploitation were placed over all other values," he says, including watershed protection and recreation. "It's like having an 1872 law that governs the Internet," he says.

The law allows all U.S. citizens 18 years or older to locate a hard rock "lode" or gravel "placer" mining claim on federal lands open to mineral entry. Sexton says that unlike other industries on public lands — like oil extraction, which is leased, or logging — hard rock mining, including gold mining, does not pay a share of profits (a royalty) to U.S. taxpayers. However, he says, taxpayers "are hit with the cost of the cleanup." This year's stimulus bill gave \$1.5 billion for construction and maintenance on public lands, and some of that money will go to cleaning up mines. Last fiscal year the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service and the Forest Service spent about \$25 million on cleaning up old mines.

Though miners are required to clean up their mines and replace disturbed gravel, "As far as I know there is no compliance monitoring at all," Sexton says. On his hikes in southern Oregon, he says, "I routinely see suction dredgers violating the conditions of their permits." However, Sexton adds that environmentalists do see a light at the end of the mining tunnel, and though he calls current mining practices "a free for all," he says he thinks the General Mining Act will be updated soon.

Ken Salazar announced on July 14 that the Obama administration is committed to rewriting the act. Mining reform legislation has been introduced in both the House and the Senate. Both versions would set up some sort of royalty structure for hard rock mining on federal lands, and a fund would be set up to pay for cleanup. — *Camilla Mortensen*

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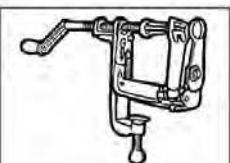


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