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Editorial: A smart budget trim will help water quality

Lawmakers looking under every rock to find flecks of budget savings have found easy pickings. Budget committee members have voted to continue the 2009 moratorium on gold suction dredge mining throughout California.

That makes good policy sense as well as budget sense. How can lawmakers justify funding a new, more expensive suction dredge mining permit and enforcement program when they face harsh cuts to big state priorities – higher education, and health care for the elderly and poor, for example? Every dime counts.

Suction dredge mining is a practice by which miners use vacuum hoses to suck up sediment, gravel and sand from river- and streambeds. The material passes through a sluice box, which traps heavier gold particles.

The problem is that dredging stirs up long-buried mercury left over from Gold Rush mining practices in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

These mercury-contaminated sediments are relatively harmless if they're left buried. But if they're stirred up and reintroduced into the aquatic system, they can become methylated and accumulate in the food web. The sluice box on a standard suction dredge does not catch fine sediments, so newly mobilized mercury goes downstream.

Under somewhat more restrictive rules proposed by the California Department of Fish and Game, a new dredging program would raise \$373,000 a year in permit fees but would cost \$1.8 million to enforce. That's not worth it.

In the 15 years before the moratorium, the state each year issued an average of 3,200 suction dredge mining permits to California residents and 450 nonresidents. That doesn't sound like a lot. But it adds up. About 270 hours of dredging per permit per year is nearly 1 million hours, potentially leading to transport of substantial amounts of mercury far downstream.

The top five watersheds for dredging activity (Yuba, Feather, Klamath, American and Trinity) account for 60 percent of all suction dredging activity statewide. Suction dredging activities that increase the concentrations and loads of mercury thus can have a big impact on the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Budget committees in both houses of the Legislature have done the right thing by blocking funding for dredge mining permits for five years, effectively extending the 2009 moratorium. This money-saver is good policy.

The Bee's past stands:

"Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger took long-overdue action last week to protect the state's endangered coho salmon when he signed a bill that slaps a temporary moratorium on suction dredge mining. ... Gold miners blame global warming, logging and pollution for the decline, and no doubt those factors have played a role. But suction dredge mining has taken a toll as well. Endangered fish and the fishing industry urgently need the protection the new moratorium provides."