

The dark side of the Gold Rush legacy

New report examines 'enormous' task of toxic cleanup at old mines

By Laura Brown, laurab@theunion.com

» More from Laura Brown

12:01 a.m. PT Mar 5, 2008

SACRAMENTO - More agency collaboration and funding is needed to address the widespread pollution of public lands and waterways in California, state Assembly leaders concluded at a joint hearing held at the capitol Tuesday.

But where the money will come from to pay the hefty cost to clean up mercury, arsenic and asbestos left behind by Gold Rush-era miners remains to be seen.

"We are again faced with cleanup costs with no source of revenue," said 8th District Assemblywoman Lois Wolk.

The cleanup is "a multi-billion dollar issue," said Dennis Geiser, a Forest Service environmental engineer.

Money set aside for cleaning the state's waterways could be tapped for mercury removal, said Elizabeth "Izzy" Martin, Sierra Fund chief executive officer. She pointed to an unclaimed \$100 million remaining from Proposition 84, the Clean Water, Parks and Coastal Protection Act.

"There's always money. It's just a matter of the priorities you assign to it," Martin said.

Martin was one of three panelists from Nevada County including Carrie Monohan, staff scientist for Friends of Deer Creek, and Don Ryberg, tribal chairman of the Tsi-Akim Maidu.

The joint informational hearing was heard by the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee, the Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee and the Assembly Natural Resources Committee.

To make the most of limited dollars, the Sierra Fund recommended

pooling sources and forming a multi-agency working group to address mining toxins.

At the close of the meeting, Wolk agreed such a collaboration was needed to address what she called an "enormous" and "stark" problem.

There are 47,000 abandoned mines in California, according to an assessment by the California Department of Conservation and outlined in a Sierra Fund report titled "Mining's Toxic Legacy: An Initiative to Address Mining Toxins in the Sierra Nevada."

The report, issued for the first time at the hearing, outlined a list of recommendations that included increasing collaboration and research, improving education on human health hazards, encouraging community monitoring, creating funding mechanisms for cleanup and **reforming suction dredging laws.**

Costs range from tens of thousands of dollars to fill abandoned mine shafts to millions of dollars to clean up mercury hot spots such as the Boston Mine near Greenhorn Creek.

Contamination stretches well beyond mine sites. An estimated 13 million pounds of mercury has entered the environment from Placer mining since it started 150 years ago, according to the Sierra Fund report.

Much of the mercury used to extract gold from ore in Sierra Nevada mining projects washed down streams to feed the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a watershed that supplies 80 percent of the state's water needs.

Mercury continues to flow from mountain streams when storms create high flows. Methylmercury, the form found in fish, poses health risks, especially to children, and can impair language and memory.

Mercury-laced fish found in a number of lakes and streams in the Sierra foothills and Central Valley require management agencies to post fish advisories.

Mercury on sacred lands

State and federal agencies working to restore the Delta are met with a paradox: Restoring habitat for fish such as salmon and other Delta wildlife can dislodge methylmercury from the sediment.

On public lands, abandoned mines in areas once considered remote now are used frequently by hikers and off-road enthusiasts.

"Risks to public health and safety increase as more people move in," said Cy Oggins, manager of the Abandoned Mines Unit for the state Department of Conservation.

The dark side of the Gold Rush legacy reaches beyond toxins that remain in the waterways.

Tribal chairman Ryberg described his ancestral lands, from a village site where the Capitol building sits now, stretching to the Sierra Crest.

"It has been Maidu lands for 10,000 years. We're from the land. We are the land," Ryberg said.

The stampede of miners that came to Nevada County during the heat of the Gold Rush all but decimated the tribe, Ryberg said.

"Our Maidu way of life, our ceremony, our songs were gone," Ryberg said.

For the past few years, the Tsi-Akim have held conferences with 26 California and Nevada tribes about the impacts of mercury. Including California tribes in the mercury discussions is necessary because many sites sit on sacred lands, the Sierra Fund report said.

ooo

To contact Staff Writer Laura Brown, e-mail lbrown@theunion.com or call 477-4231.