

# The Klamath-Siskiyou & the New Gold Rush:

## *What's the deal on the front lines?*

The Klamath-Siskiyou region has long and sordid history of gold mining. Harmful activities encouraged by the 1872 Mining Act have dramatically changed the terrestrial and aquatic landscapes of the area. Streams, rivers and forests are still recovering from massive hydraulic mining operations that washed away entire hillsides in the late 1800s. The toxic heavy metal stew from old mining adits still leaches into public waterways. And with the steady increase in the price of gold, public lands mining is on the increase in salmon bearing streams throughout the region.

### What are some of the ongoing impacts of mining to public lands and waters?

**Suction dredging:** Suction dredge mining uses floating engine-powered machines with hoses to break -up and vacuum the bottom of a stream and filter out gold. The machines then discharge riverbed materials back into the water, creating sediment plumes and piles of debris. Salmon require very specific parameters to successfully spawn. Suction dredging alters the structure of the stream channel, destabilizes spawning beds, increases sedimentation, and can re-suspend contaminants such as mercury and other heavy metals. Suction dredging clouds otherwise clear-flowing water, increasing its thermal absorption capacity, further stressing fish.

Currently, there is a moratorium on suction dredging in California due to impacts on salmon and other fish. There are currently ~2,000 miners registered for suction dredge permits in Oregon. Most of these miners are dredging in the Rogue and Illinois River basins. Salmon-bearing streams and rivers at particular risk include: Althouse Creek, the mainstem Illinois, the Chetco River, Rough and Ready Creek, Silver Creek, Briggs Creek and several stretches of the Rogue.

**Placer mining:** Placer mining is the mining of alluvial soils for minerals. Generally, streamside forest are clearcut, the ground is leveled and then stripped down to bedrock, and a stream is diverted to create a holding pond in which the mineral (usually gold) is separated from the gravel. The majority of placer mine claims are in the Illinois Valley and in the Klamath River Watershed. The proposed High Bar placer mine on the South Fork Salmon River threatens the Klamath's struggling Chinook salmon runs. KS Wild stopped the mine in 2010 and is keeping an eye on it.

Sucker Creek, a tributary to the Illinois River, is a stronghold for endangered Coho salmon. In 2009, miner Clifford Tracy was arrested on Sucker Creek, and later convicted, for mining on public lands without permission or permits. Before being arrested, he bulldozed through, and dumped sediment into, critical salmon habitat in Sucker Creek, logged in a riparian reserve and diverted feeder creeks. He is now gearing up to work other mining claims on Sucker Creek public lands. In 2011, Rogue Riverkeeper filed suit against another mining operation on Sucker Creek that is harming critical habitat for salmon.

Virtually no public lands, no matter how fragile or unique, are fully protected from placer mining. There is even a current proposal to mine the French Flat Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) on BLM lands in Southern Oregon. The presence of rare, endemic and listed wildflowers makes little difference to gold miners or their enablers in the BLM.

**Hardrock and gravel:** Other forms of mining that impact the region include in-stream gravel mining and hardrock, or underground, mining. In-stream gravel mining is a major issue on the Lower Rogue and Lower Chetco Rivers, as well as on the Applegate and Middle Rogue Rivers. The Benton gold mine adjacent to the Wild and Scenic Rogue River corridor operated for years in violation of the Clean Water Act. As Rogue Riverkeeper sent the operators a notice of intent to sue, the State of Oregon shut down the operation for other violations. The owners of the mine are looking at new operators to re-open the mine.



Scott Harding



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**Chetco River:** The Wild and Scenic Chetco is a world-class fishery flowing from the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. The river is now threatened by a proposal to mine nearly half its length—using suction dredges—on public lands. Much of this mining is proposed within the renowned Kalmiopsis Wilderness area. In 2009, Representative DeFazio and Senators Wyden and Merkley introduced legislation to withdrawal areas of the Wild and Scenic Chetco River from mineral entry. While Congress adjourned in 2010 without securing this bill, we are hopeful that Oregon's delegation will reinvigorate this effort in 2011.

The same Seattle realtor who wants to mine the mainstem Chetco also owns the only private inholding within the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, where he has illegally constructed multiple cabins and offers vacation packages in which he helicopters recreation miners in to conduct “dude ranch” style mining inside of the Wilderness area.

## A toxic legacy

The abandoned Almeda Mine on Medford BLM land leaches toxic metals into the Wild and Scenic Rogue River. Taxpayers have already shelled out hundreds of thousands of dollars to study cleanup, but a solution has not yet been found. More than \$8 million in federal funds has been used to clean up toxic soil and water pollution at the abandoned Blue Ledge copper mine in the upper Applegate River watershed. The toxic runoff has obliterated aquatic life for more than a mile downstream, and fish have tested positive for elevated levels of arsenic and lead. There is a plethora of lower profile abandoned mines on public and private lands, and we know little about what amount of pollution they are contributing to our waterways.

**Threats and Violence:** Mining in the Klamath-Siskiyou has been plagued by violence since its beginning. Native Americans were on the receiving end of most of this, but claim jumping, shootings, and murders were commonplace throughout its history. Today, this culture of lawlessness, entitlement, and violence is once again on the rise. Believing the 1872 and 1866 mining acts place them above the law, some in the mining community steadfastly adhere to their belief that there are no limits on their ‘right’ to mine lands and waters that belong to everyone. Public lands miners are extracting valuable minerals from public lands they do not own, at minimal cost, and paying no royalties on their take.

Throughout Southwest Oregon and Northwest California visitors to public lands are welcomed by “no trespassing” signs on federal mining claims often warning of violence towards those who would hike, drive, fish or hunt there. Many public lands miners believe they own our National Forests and have the right to exclude, or harm, other users. The threat of violence is real. In 2009, a miner inside of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest shot an four-wheel drive enthusiast who dared to ride on a Forest Service road “too close” to the public lands mining claim. The rider’s arm was eventually amputated as a result of the shooting.



*This sign was posted on a U.S. Forest Service Trail inside the Kalmiopsis Wilderness.*

## Getting at the source: an outdated law

The root cause of mining pollution on public lands in the United States is the 1872 Mining Law. Here is how it works: (1) A private mining interest files a mineral claim on federal lands near a stream; (2) the mining interest extracts all the valuable minerals (i.e. gold) from the public lands while paying no royalties; (3) laws that would limit the environmental damage of the mining are largely waived or ignored; (4) the mining interest packs up and leaves; and (5) the taxpayer is left paying to clean up the cyanide, arsenic and toxic metals left behind.

For years, salmon enthusiasts, commercial fishing interests and taxpayer groups have advocated for changes to the 1872 Mining Act. In 2007, Congress came tantalizingly close when the U.S. House passed legislation to require that taxpayers receive royalties from mineral extraction on public lands while bolstering watershed protections. Unfortunately, the U.S. Senate failed to act. Ultimately, Congress must finish its work and reform the outdated 1872 Mining Act so that water quality and taxpayers don't always play second fiddle to private mining profits extracted from public lands. It is time to take seriously the persistent past and current threats of mining on salmon so that we can restore this piece of the Pacific Northwest's soul.

## What role are KS Wild and Rogue Riverkeeper playing in all this?

In the Klamath-Siskiyou, KS Wild and Rogue Riverkeeper are documenting the impacts and violations of active mines, opposing harmful new mining proposals, advocating for the remediation of abandoned mines and advancing legislative efforts to minimize the impacts of mining on fish and public waters.



**KS Wild:** [www.kswild.org](http://www.kswild.org)

**Rogue Riverkeeper:** [www.rogueriverkeeper.org](http://www.rogueriverkeeper.org)

**Western Mining Action Network:** [www.wman-info.org](http://www.wman-info.org)

**1872 Mining Law Reform:** [www.earthworksaction.org](http://www.earthworksaction.org) & [www.pewminingreform.org](http://www.pewminingreform.org)

