

The Importance of Sand Mining in the Bay-Delta Region

Bay Planning Coalition

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Commercial sand mining within the Bay-Delta estuary (e.g., San Francisco and Suisun Bays) is a crucial economic activity that has invaluable environmental benefits compared to alternative sand acquisition activities. This activity, which has occurred in the Bay-Delta system for over 70 years, is a separate and distinct process from dredging. Sand mining extracts a necessary construction resource from the Bay-Delta floor, and occurs only where suitable sand for this purpose can be found. This activity is a regulatory-permitted activity, whereby the Bay-Delta floor is leased to the sand mining companies by the California State Lands Commission. Sand mining is an essential and sustainable economic activity in our region that provides a necessary product for use in construction, infrastructure maintenance, and flood control.

As the economy recovers, the Bay Area population grows, and maintenance and replacement of critical infrastructure continues, the construction trades will need sand, a key component of building materials, including concrete and asphalt. Sand is necessary for the foundational components of construction and maintenance of highway systems, and of commercial, residential and public building construction. In addition, sand mining will continue to play a critical role in shoreline protection from climate change and storm surges, and for recreation.

If locally mined sand is not available to those that require it, it will be ordered from elsewhere in the country and North America, and shipped, trucked or transported by rail to the Bay Area. This will have direct and indirect impacts in terms of job loss, increased pollution, and more. It makes no practical environmental or economic sense to transport sand from as far away as British Columbia, Canada to supply our building industry with its most essential of products; a product that has been supplied from local sources safely and environmentally securely for many decades.

The Air Quality Technical Appendix of the Environmental Assessment of the Hanson and Jerico Sand Mining Operations in the San Francisco Bay shows that mining sand from the Bay for the purpose of supplying local and regional needs results in 20% – 50% less greenhouse gas and criteria air pollutant emissions than if the sand were trucked in from other locales. It also results in 300% fewer vehicle miles traveled for sand delivery.

In terms of economic impacts to the Bay Area, permitting Hanson and Jerico to continue mining sand from the Bay will result in savings of up to 35% for sand purchasers, as compared to what they would be forced to pay if sand was brought in from elsewhere. The premium paid for non-local sand purchases could amount to up to 31 million more dollars over 10 years. In addition, increased trucking needed to bring sand to Bay Area customers from other sources would necessitate up to 10 million additional dollars in road repairs, as cost borne by the taxpayers.

In terms of the ecosystem impacts of sand mining, sediment transport analysis shows that sand mining areas (“mining holes”) do not capture a significant amount of the sand migrating through the Bay, and thus do not induce a sand deficit in other areas. Mining activities in the Bay do not have a measurable impact on issues of concern such as the erosion of the San Francisco Bar and adjacent Ocean Beach. The general net flux of water and sediment in the Delta and Bay is seaward, out the Golden Gate. Sand mining operations will not noticeably change that trend.

While the SF Bar may be shrinking, this is a historical pattern that is governed by much larger and more long-term natural factors and processes than sand mining within the Bay.

In the interest of our growing economy, job protection, prized quality of life, air quality, and environment, Bay Planning Coalition strongly supports the continued permitting of Hanson and Jerico for sand mining operations in the Bay-Delta region for the next ten years. We urge BCDC and other regulatory agencies to consider the negative impacts of not having a local source of this essential product. We also urge BCDC to recognize the environmental advantages of local sand mining, and the environmental stewardship that our local sand mining businesses have implemented in their operations. We cannot replace sand as an essential product for construction activities – construction that is necessary for not just continued development, but also for safety programs including infrastructure and flood protection. While sand technically could be supplied through economically impractical importation, would it be environmentally responsible to import this locally-available product hundreds if not thousands of miles to the Bay area? We do not believe that the local citizenry, businesses, and policy makers would accept the economic and environmental costs that would be incurred from eliminating sand mining from the Bay.