

# Poison Lurks in Bay Sludge

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 **Articles** : **Ecology & Environment**

## Poison Lurks in Bay Sludge

The young man kayaking on the choppy waters of India Basin looked like any other Sunday paddler, but he was a spy for the Bay. He was watching Pit Hog, a piece of dredging equipment that digs up Bay muds, sitting in the marina of the Donco Industries boat yard, where Navy vessels and others were repaired.

Donco may have needed dredging to bring in more of the big ships for repair, but it had no permit.

Dredging is necessary to keep marinas clear of the silt that continually flows down the tributaries to the Bay. Dredging makes room for the 4,000 commercial ocean vessels that move through the estuary annually, carrying more than 50 million tons of cargo worth \$25 billion.

But toxic chemicals embedded in the sludge can spread poison in the Bay when dredged up. And the dumping of dredged spoils can muddy the waters as well as smother life on the bottom.

Stubbornly, the kayaker — an undercover volunteer for the environmental watchdog group the BayKeeper — returned again and again, usually at low tide when dredgers were most likely to be chewing away at the mud.

One evening, through 10-power binoculars from a spit near the India Basin PG&E plant, the man saw the Pit Hog hungrily eating up sediment and spitting it out in shallow waters.

He took some pictures and the U.S. attorney's office used his report along with other evidence to indict two Donco officials for illegally dredging sludge that blocked the channel and underwater railway tracks at the boat yard, dumping the spoils on land and into the Bay off Hunters Point without a permit.

It was the first prosecution of environmental crimes in the Bay. [Prosecution led to the indictment of two Donco executives.]...

Although it's illegal to dredge without a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit, regulators have been lax in catching and prosecuting violators. The Donco indictment was only the seventh criminal-dredging case brought anywhere under the Clean Water Act.

That's one of the reasons sailor-environmentalist Michael Herz set up shop as BayKeeper four years ago: To ferret out leaking tankers, overflowing bilge water, illegal filling of wetlands and dredging.

### **Where to put spoils**

The temptation to clear a channel without a permit is great. Permits have become increasingly difficult to obtain in the Bay.

For a decade, ports, shipping lines, regulators, labor, environmentalists and scientists have been struggling with the question of where to put the spoils of dredging.

Most have been dumped near Alcatraz, on the assumption they would be flushed from the Bay by tidal actions. That dumping has created a 30 million-cubic-yard mountain, the size of a pile of 15 million refrigerators, according to the Corps of Engineers.

U.S. Geological Survey studies indicated as early as 1969 that the Bay does not flush itself out. Tidal action and river flows cause a complex revolving circulation of fresh and salt water....

Yet the corps continues to allow dumping near Alcatraz. Each year, 8 million cubic yards of mud is dredged from ports and channels. One-half ends up near Alcatraz, the rest in San Pablo Bay, Carquinez Strait, outside the Gate and on land sites.

Excerpted from Jane Kay, *Bay in Peril* (Examiner, October 1993), p. 9

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