

## Local business Hydro Watt sticks to the basics

By Ivan Natividad  
Staff Writer

While watching the Discovery Channel's television show "Gold Rush," recently Michael Wedel found himself laughing at what he saw.

"They had a trommel on there saying it was the latest and greatest, and I laughed, it was a joke," Wedel said. "They're making things way too complicated; all this technology has been around in the Gold Rush down here in the Mother Lode. But they're always trying to come up with something that's the latest and greatest and the newest, and they forget the basics."

As owner of Hydro Watt Inc., a service and engineering company located in Nevada City, Wedel, 62, is often contracted to serve companies such as Pacific Gas and Electric, and Southern California Edison, to build mining equipment, hydroelectric plants, or put in culvert lining under-north highways.

As a small company, though, Hydro Watt has worked on large projects, such as repairing the largest Westinghouse Pelton wheel ever made for SCE.

"We used a gear box motor and a flat belt to turn everything and people laughed, people absolutely laughed," Wedel said. "But when the finish on it was beautiful, they didn't laugh anymore."

Wedel says his company values the old school way of doing things, but also embraces new technology when needed.

"That's why they could build things in the '20s and '30s and '40s with great



Hydro Watt's construction team lifts a trommel they built.

accuracy in everything that we have trouble in now," Wedel said. "We try to use some of the new technology, which works, but we've lost some of the simplicity of the way they did it back then."

After studying civil engineering at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, Wedel, a Los Angeles native, got a job in 1981 rebuilding propulsion ships on military nuclear aircrafts in the Bay Area. When the government moved fleets of nuclear ships out of the bay in 1982, Wedel said the company he worked for lost a good chunk of their business.

"When that died my boss said 'See what you can do to get into the hydro industry,'" Wedel recalls. "Because a propeller shaft on a ship runs the same speed as most of the hydro plants." Wedel and a partner

got into the hydro plant business in 1991 founding the company Electro Watt. When Wedel's partner died of a brain tumor, Wedel moved up to Nevada City and started his own business, Hydro Watt.

"I moved up here basically as a supply business while doing a little bit of hydro repair work," Wedel said. "The mining business had died in 1997, gold prices were down, and there was not a lot of new construction in the area. So what kept me alive were the different products we sold and doing the few hydro jobs."

But in 2012, Wedel said mining came back with a vengeance and he began getting contracts for building sand and gravel equipment such as trommels, which are a screened cylinder used to separate

materials by size. Wedel said he would get hired for projects by East Coast companies that felt the location of his company would hinder his productivity.

"Make, you live in the mountains and when I Google your address where are you? You have no facilities," Wedel recalls one of his clients saying. "They didn't believe we had any facilities out here that would do it, and that's not true. When they came out here and reviewed the shop, they were totally shocked that we had all the capabilities here that the shops back east didn't."

One recent project that caused quite a stir locally was a 65-foot long trommel with a 9-foot diameter. Wedel said that old gold miners thought it was built for gold and followed the trommel as it was being transported in the hopes of finding out the location where a trommel that size would be separating gold from dirt.

"They were thinking someone struck it rich with huge gold nuggets," Wedel said. "But the trommel was used for a sand and gravel operation instead."

Wedel says that his diversified business is unique because he combines machining and field work into one company, something he says most companies separate. Wedel says that his company, along with a slew of many others in the area, prove that Nevada County has a lot of untapped services and resources that can service projects on a global scale.

"You look at what Grass Valley Group did, they virtually turned football viewing upside down, you have Fenwick, Titan, and there's a lot of Silicon Valley

stuff up here," Wedel said. "I don't think most of us are aware of that. We have a lot of capabilities up here, so I'm a big proponent of promoting our area."

Wedel added, "We're building for Martin Marietta, they're the second largest sand and gravel company in the United States and third or fourth in the world," Wedel said. "We're getting world coverage in

the customers that we're doing, and we're doing it using the basics."

For more information go to <http://www.hydro-watt.com>.

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### THE DAY ON WALL STREET OCT. 29, 2014



### COMMODITIES



### LOCAL STOCKS

Name	Last	Prev. Cls.	Name	Last	Prev. Cls.
AT&T	36.40	34.33	PG&E Corp.	48.31	47.52
Bank of America	16.99	16.80	Software Inc.	24.70	24.13
BHP Parzon SA	48.47	48.47	TiCounters Bank	24.46	24.53
Engelhard Mining	0.02	0.02	Western	49.83	49.96
Hewlett-Packard	35.38	35.54	Wells Fargo & Co.	52.17	51.78
Newmont Mining	20.81	21.85	Western Star	49.01	48.32

