

Gold mining method barred

Ban extended on suction dredging

Dylan Darling, Redding Record Searchlight, 8-1-11

Maurice Huff and other north state gold prospectors had been hopeful a ban on suction dredging would end later this year, but Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law likely extending the ban for another five years.

"I don't think we'll see California dredging anymore," said Huff, 78, of Redding. "I think it is gone."

Brown signed Assembly Bill 120 into law last week, likely stretching a ban on suction dredging to 2016. Brown's office didn't release a statement about the signing.

The state Department of Fish and Game banned suction dredging in 2008, saying the practice could be harming fish such as salmon and their spawning beds.

In a suction dredge, a gas or diesel motor drives a vacuum that sucks up underwater river rocks. The prospector running the dredge then tumbles the rocks through a sluice box in search of gold.

During a May meeting in Redding, the DFG outlined a plan to lift the ban but increasing regulations on suction dredging. The DFG expected to end the ban late this year after reviewing about 10,000 comments.

The new law trumps that plan, said Mark Stopher, environmental program manager with the DFG in Redding.

Under the law, written by a budget committee chaired by Assembly member Bob Blumenfield, D-Woodland Hills, suction dredging will be banned for five years unless all environmental impacts are mitigated and the DFG designs a new fee system, Stopher said. It's unclear how long it would take the DFG to meet those guidelines, he said.

"We are still trying to sort through what is possible under the new requirements," Stopher said.

Critics of suction dredging cheer the new law, saying it will protect salmon and the rivers they swim in, said Craig Tucker, spokesman for the Karuk Tribe on the Klamath River. He said suction dredging wrecks spawning beds for salmon, steelhead and lamprey while also stirring up mercury from deep in the riverbed.

Huff, the past president of the Shasta Miners and Prospectors Association, and other prospectors contend that suction dredging actually cleans out spawning beds.

"If anything the dredging is beneficial for the salmon," Huff said.

Like Huff, Tucker said the new law could be a harbinger of the complete demise of suction dredging in the state. "We are getting to the point where we think it should be banned all together," Tucker said.