

Moratorium on suction dredging likely to end; gold miners criticize proposed DFG restrictions

Dylan Darling, Redding Record Searchlight, 3-19-11

Fish and game officials are preparing to lift a moratorium on suction dredging in the state's rivers and creeks.

While miners are eager to resume dredging, they're already grumbling about what they say are overly restrictive regulations the Department of Fish and Game plans to put in place.

"They're reopening the water — that's a plus," said Chip Hess, 62, co-owner of the Miner's Cache in Redding.

But he said the cutbacks and restrictions being considered by the DFG aren't necessary. Hess' shop sells mining gear, including suction dredges and support gear. The dredges are like a massive vacuum, powered by a gas or diesel motor, that suck up riverbed rocks that miners then tumble through sluice boxes to reveal gold flakes or nuggets.

Citing concerns about suction dredging harming fish and their spawning habitat, the DFG instituted a moratorium on the practice in 2008 while its scientists studied it further. In doing so, it held a meeting to collect public comment in Redding that drew a couple of hundred people in November 2009. Most of them were miners upset about the moratorium.

Now the DFG has an 864-page draft plan, with 2,000 pages in appendixes, detailing how it thinks dredging should be done around the state.

"What we are proposing would reopen suction dredging in California under modified restrictions," said Mark Stopher, environmental program manager with the DFG in Redding.

There's a public meeting about the plan set for March 31 in Redding. Hess and other members of the Shasta Miners and Prospectors Association, a group of more than a hundred north state miners, said they'll be there.

Prepping for the meeting, miners such as Randy Davis, 58, of Weaverville are scouring the DFG plan. "So far, I don't like what I see," he said.

A once regular suction dredger, Davis said he's lost about \$25,000 to \$30,000 in supplemental income during the moratorium. Gold was selling at about \$1,400 per ounce last week.

In reviewing the plan, he said it looks as if the DFG would not allow suction dredging on 80 percent to 90 percent of the streams that miners often worked.

For him that means he wouldn't be able to do suction dredging on Redding, Weaver, Dutch and other creeks running into the Trinity River near Weaverville.

"That's where the majority of the gold comes from, the side streams," Davis said.

After public meetings in Redding, Fresno, Sacramento and Yreka, scientists will respond to public comments and finalize the report, likely by early November, Stopher said.

The DFG then likely will start selling suction dredging permits again and they'd be good for the rest of the year and 2012, although it may be a while before miners are in the water again. "It's usually a summertime and fall activity," he said.