

State could cut permits for gold dredging in rivers and streams

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 3-2-11

A new environmental study of California's suction dredge mining program could reduce the number of permits issued for that activity by more than half.

The environmental impact report on the program was prepared by the California Department of Fish and Game as a result of a lawsuit against its suction dredge permitting practices. The Karuk Tribe alleged suction dredging was harming fish spawning habitat and also releasing pollutants in streambeds left behind by historic mining activity.

Suction dredging involves using a powerful pump, usually driven by a generator mounted on a raft, to vacuum up streambed sediments and separate out gold and other valuable minerals. Some of the heaviest such activity occurs in Sierra, Plumas, Placer and El Dorado counties. Participation requires an annual Fish and Game permit that costs \$47 for residents, \$185 for nonresidents.

A court ruling in 2009 required the new study of the program, and Fish and Game suspended the permitting program in the meantime.

The study identifies an "environmentally superior" alternative that would limit suction dredge permits to 1,500 annually, compared to an average of 3,200 issued annually over the past 15 years. It would also limit dredge nozzle size to 4 inches, compared to the current maximum of 8 inches, and would limit dredging to 14 days a year for each permit holder.

Fish and Game has scheduled five public meetings on the study this month, including one in Sacramento on March 29 at 5 p.m. at the Cal EPA Headquarters Building, 1001 I St.

For information and to read the study, visit: <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/suctiondredge/> or call (530) 225-2275. Public comments will be accepted until April 29 by writing to Mark Stopher, California Department of Fish and Game, 601 Locust St., Redding, CA 96001; or by email to dfgsuctiondredge@dfg.ca.gov.