

Gold mining threatens Yosemite, groups say

Susanne Rust, California Watch, 9-27-11

As state officials spar with illegal gold miners in El Dorado County, environmental groups are eyeing a flurry of new claims near Yosemite National Park that they fear could poison the park's animals, plants and water.

In the past five years, mining companies have staked 285 claims within 10 miles of Yosemite, said Mac Farrell, a preservation associate with LA-based Environment California.

“These claims are close enough that the cyanide and other toxic chemicals they use to separate ore from rock could run off into the Tuolumne River and the trails and wildlands that surround it,” said Farrell, adding that only a tiny amount of cyanide is needed to kill fish and other wildlife.

In June, U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced a 1 million-acre ban around the Grand Canyon, where a similar uptick in mining claims had occurred.

Farrell is hoping a similar moratorium or ban will be applied to Yosemite. And while his work is focused primarily on legal operations, others are keeping their eyes on illegal grabs for gold.

According to Don Drysdale, spokesman for the state Department of Conservation, the Office of Mine Reclamation is aware of 32 illegal gold mining operations in the state, mostly on U.S. Forest Service land.

“However, it’s not clear how many of them trigger” state enforcement, he said. The state will need to work with federal officials to determine the size and status of the mines.

To come under state jurisdiction, a surface mining operation must disturb more than 1 acre or remove more than 1,000 cubic yards of material.

And as Drysdale pointed out, the Office of Mine Reclamation does not have a police force of its own, so it must rely on other state and federal agencies and private citizens to help identify the sites.

For now, the state is aware of 20 mines in California producing some gold, with seven focusing exclusively on gold production.

According to 2009 figures, two of the seven reported an ounce or less of gold production, and one reported 60 ounces.

The total for gold production in 2009 (the last year for which data is available) was nearly 166,000 ounces, with Mesquite Mine in Imperial County producing about 86 percent of that total and Briggs Mine, in Inyo County, following with a distant 7 percent.

Drysdale said there are three mines gearing up for production: Sutter Gold Mining Inc. in Amador County, the Idaho-Maryland Mine in the city of Grass Valley and the Golden Queen Mining Co. in Kern County.

The state is also aware of other projects in Modoc, Mono and Inyo counties, but they “are not as far along in development as the others,” Drysdale said.