

Karuk Tribe of California

PRESS RELEASE

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Minor Restrictions on Suction Dredges a Mining Could be a Major Boost for Salmon Recovery Efforts

Happy Camp, CA – An pending agreement between the Karuk Tribe and California Fish and Game could place proposes minor restrictions on recreational suction dredge mining that will pay big dividends for salmon recovery efforts. By selectively protecting the best remaining cold water sources used by young salmon at certain times of year, the agreement will aid salmon recovery efforts while still allowing for recreational suction dredge mining. Panning for gold will not be affected by the agreement.

“This should not be interpreted as Indian versus miner issue. This is a win-win for the entire river community since we all depend on a healthy fishery. Miners still have over 255 of miles of river open to them yet the most critical cold water habitats will be protected,” according to Sandi Tripp, Natural Resources Director for the Karuk Leaf Hillman, Vice-chair of the Karuk Tribe.

The agreement stems from a complaint filed by the Karuk Tribe earlier this year charging that California Fish and Game was failing to adequately protect fish from the negative impacts of suction dredge mining. In 1994, the agency’s own Biological Opinion pertaining to suction dredge mining stated that the practice could jeopardize the continued existence of any threatened or endangered species or “species of special concern.” A year after the Biological Opinion was adopted the State of California recognized Coho salmon, Pink salmon, Chum salmon, Green sturgeon, and Klamath River lamprey as “species of special concern.” In March of 2005, the state listed Coho as a Threatened Species under the California Endangered Species Act.

According to HillmanMrs. Tripp, “despite the clear recognition that salmon and other fish species are in trouble, Fish and Game continued to allow suction dredging during spawning and migration. This agreement redresses the issue.”

Suction dredge mining is done recreationally throughout the Klamath Basin. The practice involves what is essentially a gas powered vacuum cleaner mounted on pontoons anchored in the river. The miner then swims along the bottom of the river vacuuming up river sediment which is run through a sluice box. Any gold would fall into the sluice box trap and the rest of the sediment is simply dumped back into the river. Depending on location, dredge size and density large areas of the stream bottom can be negatively impacted by this recreational activity. The practice harms fish by suctioning up and

killing salmon eggs and frye, modifying the streambed, and degrading water quality.

“The overall impacts to miners will be minimal, but the benefit to the fishery and the local economies that depend on the fishery will be huge,” according to Hillman Tripp.

Efforts to protect Klamath salmon have intensified since the fish kill of 2002 where over 68,000 adult salmon died before spawning. Agencies cited low flows and warm water temperatures as the cause of the kill. “We are focused on identifying and protecting the most important cold water areas and the change in mining rules would be step in that direction,” according to HillmanTripp.

The Karuk Tribe hopes that by taking measures to protect critical fish habitat that there will not be any future ESA listings of fish and that species such as Coho can one day be de-listed. Hillman adds that, “Indians don’t want fish on the Endangered Species List, we want them in our smoke houses.” According to Karuk Vice-Chairman Leaf Hillman, “Indians don’t want fish on the Endangered Species List, we want them in our smoke houses.”

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