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Emergency gold dredging rules pitched

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An American Indian tribe and fishing groups are asking the California Department of Fish and Game to impose emergency rules on suction dredge mining for gold in Klamath River basin streams, which they say hurts already struggling salmon and steelhead.

In a petition to the department, the Karuk Tribe, California Trout and the Sierra Fund have asked that rules be tightened while Fish and Game overhauls dredging restrictions. The groups won a court ruling in 2006 that pressed the department to craft new rules, but gold miners intervened, saying rule-making must follow the California Environmental Quality Act process.

Fish and Game is only now beginning that process, and the tribes and fishing groups say salmon are being harmed in the meantime. An emergency action would put temporary restrictions in place while the CEQA process plays out.

They use that authority to restrict fishermen all the time, said Craig Tucker, Klamath campaign coordinator for the Karuk Tribe. Why can't they use it to restrict miners?

State Sen. Patricia Wiggins, D-Santa Rosa, in support of the petition, has asked the State Water Resources Control Board to withhold funding to do the environmental analysis for new rules unless Fish and Game adopts emergency regulations.

Suction dredging sucks sand and gravel from the bottom of a stream and sends it into equipment that recovers heavier gold. The gravel and sand is sent back into the stream.

Dredging processes much more material than panning, which would not be affected by the rules.

Emergency rules would limit when and where suction dredging could be done in the Klamath River and tributaries and would close five Sierra Nevada streams, if the groups' petition request is granted.

An opponent to the emergency rules is the New '49ers club. The club takes members prospecting for gold in Klamath River streams where a significant gold rush occurred more than 100 years ago. The club has argued that restricting or banning dredging would severely limit money-making opportunities.

Owner Dave McCracken could not be reached by deadline, but discussions are under way on the club's Web site message forum, calling the petition a waste of taxpayer money aimed at restricting an activity that can't be proved to be harmful to salmon.

The department and the National Marine Fisheries Service consider dredging potentially harmful to salmon. Permits are not supposed to be issued for activities that harm threatened species or species of special concern, such as coho salmon, steelhead, sturgeon and lamprey.

Fish and Game spokeswoman Jordan Traverso said the petition for emergency rules is complex and is under review, and the department has not yet taken a position on it.

Wiggins, who chairs the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture, said an alarming decline in fisheries threatens fishing opportunities in the future.

This crisis has caused tremendous hardships for fishermen, their families and the North Coast economy, Wiggins said in a statement. We must do everything we can to protect the fisheries, which are essential to their survival, especially in today's depressed economic environment.

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