

Washington: New Law Bans Suction Dredge Mining in Critical Habitats

By Michael Hamilton

Washington State has banned suction dredge mining for threatened or endangered salmon, steelhead, and bull trout in critical habitat designated under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The new law brings Washington into compliance with the Clean Water Act and in line with court-backed regulations banning suction dredge mining in neighboring and nearby states.



“For years, we’ve had enormous taxpayer investment in restoring water quality and fish habitat while we let outdated motorized suction dredge mining laws needlessly threaten our most sensitive fish populations,” says Crystal Elliot, Washington State Habitat Director for Trout Unlimited, which has led the statewide coalition to address this issue. “We gained urgency and public awareness to protect critical habitat because of diminishing returns of wild salmon and the plight of orcas in Puget Sound,” she adds.

The tipping point to enact the new measure came from the support of hundreds of businesses, nonprofit organizations, and faith-based groups, as well Native American tribes from across Washington state. “We have spent years working to raise awareness of this outdated practice that destroys sensitive habitat to benefit a small number of hobbyist miners,” explains Robert de los Angeles, chairman of the

Snoqualmie Tribe, “so it is extremely gratifying that our state leaders are listening and embracing policies under the Federal Endangered Species Act that are more consistent with all of our neighboring states.”

Suction dredge mining uses gas-powered dredges to vacuum up rocks, gravel, and sediment from the bottom of streams to search for gold. Impacts observed by Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) include erosion and sedimentation, mobilization of mercury and other heavy metals, increase in water temperatures, water contamination, and habitat destruction, as well as damage to fish eggs, juvenile fish, invertebrates, and other aquatic organisms.

Chuck Wilson, president of the Washington Prospectors Mining Association, disagrees, stating publicly that miners are stewards of the waterways they dredge. He says, “There’s a lot of misconceptions about the equipment we use, including that the dredge has blades inside that chop up fish. I’ve been in a river where fish come up to the tube, go through, then come back and go through again. They think it’s Disneyland.”

In habitat deemed noncritical by the WDFW and the Washington Department of Ecology, mineral prospectors can still dredge if they obtain hydraulic project approvals (HPAs). The WDFW manages HPAs and has 45 days to approve or deny completed applications. #

