

Small Suction Dredging on BLM Lands

Idaho

BLM

What is a small suction dredge?

Small portable suction dredges typically consist of pontoons that support an engine-driven pump and sluice box, with a suction hose that pulls gravel from the bottom and delivers it to the sluice, which then discharges back into the water. These devices are commonly used by recreationists to recover placer gold from rivers and streams. Although the BLM does not define what constitutes a “small suction dredge,” it has historically applied the Idaho Department of Water Resources’ (IDWR) definition as those dredges with a 5” or less suction hose intake diameter and a 15 hp or less engine. The use of small suction dredges in Idaho is regulated by the IDWR, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the BLM.

Where can I dredge?

Surface management regulations require that an individual planning to conduct suction dredging first notify the BLM in writing so that BLM can determine whether a notice or plan of operations is required, or whether the proposed activity constitutes casual use. (IDWR and EPA also require the permit applicant to notify BLM). If the proposed suction dredging is located in lands or waters known to contain, or are critical habitat for, T&E species, regardless of the level of disturbance, then the BLM must first complete consultations with the appropriate Federal agencies before operations can begin. After consultation, the BLM may determine that the proposed suction dredging constitutes casual use, or that a Plan of Operations is required.

Failure of an individual to comply with the above BLM requirements may result in an enforcement action, including the issuance of a non-compliance order or suspension order.

How does BLM characterize mining activities?

BLM surface management regulations for mining address three levels of activity:

- 1) Activities which result in “negligible” or no disturbance is considered “casual use.” According to BLM regulations, such activities may apply to small portable suction dredges.
- 2) Those activities which result in disturbance greater than casual use, but less than five acres, are termed “exploration” and require the submittal of a Notice.
- 3) All other activities usually require the submittal of a Plan of Operations, including those activities greater than casual use that will take place in “special status” areas, including lands or waters that are known to contain, or are critical habitat for, threatened or endangered (T&E) species.

