

Recreational Dredging
On the
Medicine Bow National Forest in Wyoming

A mining dredge is a device which "vacuums" up water and gravel from a stream or river and then directs the discharge through a riffle box where gold and other heavy objects are trapped. A recreational scale dredge setup commonly consists of a water pump driven by a small gasoline engine and a riffle box. This equipment is floated on inflated tire inner tubes or ridged fiberglass floats. The operator usually will wear a wet or dry type diving suit so that he may spend relatively long periods in the water and maintain a comfortable temperature. In deep water, the operator will be supplied air through a hose from an air pump, thus allowing for complete submersion of the operator.

Every year, we get requests from people wanting to use small dredges to search for valuable minerals on the National Forest. All mineral exploration on National Forest land is regulated under 36 CFR 228. What we refer to as "recreational dredging" is considered prospecting, and is subject to the same laws and regulations applicable to large mining operations regarding mining laws and environmental laws. The District Ranger is responsible for determining whether or not significant disturbance is likely to occur. If significant disturbance is expected, a mining plan of operations is required for evaluation and approval before operations may begin.

It is our experience that recreational dredging usually will not result in significant disturbance in most streams under the following circumstances:

1. The dredge has a 3 inch or smaller suction intake.
2. Streams are not "Blue Ribbon", "Wild Trout Water", or a stream regulated as "catch & release" only (see state fishing regulations for these streams).
3. Practices mentioned in the State of Wyoming DEQ "Guideline 19" are followed.
4. Camping does not exceed the 21 day stay limit, that applies to all visitors.
5. Dredging is restricted to the July 1 through September 10 to avoid affecting fish spawning habitat.
6. Care should be taken to completely clean dredges and clothing worn in the creeks to minimize the potential spread of whirling disease.

If a prospector can't meet all of the above, then we must conclude that significant disturbance may occur, and that a Plan of Operations may be needed.

Whether or not a dredger meets the above "rules of thumb" we request that they fill out the Letter of Intent form and return it to the Laramie office. There are some areas that are not open to mineral exploration, and we can help you identify those beforehand.