



**SUCTION DREDGING,  
SLUICING AND PANNING  
ACTIVITIES ON THE  
SALMON-CHALLIS NATIONAL FOREST**

United States  
Department of Agriculture  
Forest Service  
Salmon-Challis National Forest  
1206 South Challis Street  
Salmon, ID 83467

**Suction Dredging** - The State of Idaho issues suction dredging permits with attachments indicating rivers and streams where dredges are permitted ([Small Scale Mining Permits Forms | Idaho Department of Water Resources \(Serve Idaho\)](#)).

The EPA requires the permit because Section 301(a) of the Clean Water Act (CWA) prohibits most point source discharges of pollutants to waters of the U.S. unless they are authorized by a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit. The EPA has defined suction dredging a point source discharge.

In order for the Forest Service to approve a Plan of Operation for any placer mining activity (such as suction dredging or sluicing), it must demonstrate compliance with the regulations of other agencies such as the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Additionally, most streams and rivers on the Forest provide critical habitat and are occupied by one or more threatened and endangered fish species. Therefore, the in-stream work window for activities such as suction dredging is very narrow (as little as two weeks or less per summer).

The Central Idaho Wilderness Act of 1980 withdrew the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness area from mineral location and prohibits all forms of placer mining in the Middle Fork Salmon River and its tributaries in their entirety. Tributaries to the Middle Fork Salmon where placer mining is prohibited include Loon Creek, Marsh Creek, Elk Creek, Bear Valley Creek, and Rapid River.

**Sluice box or trommel operations** excavate materials near a stream and use the water from the stream to rinse the materials in the sluice box, leaving the gold. Sluice box or trommel operations that involve operation in or near stream banks will normally require a Plan of Operations. The standard Forest advice is that an operator should submit their plan for USFS review as early as possible during the operating season prior to their desired start up.

In general, if you are going to propose a sluice, trommel or other placer operation then you need to have a pre-approved water right that you can demonstrate to the Forest Service. For operations of limited water quantity and duration (one year or less), it is generally possible to obtain a temporary water right through the Idaho Department of Water resources.

**Panning** - The Forest does not have a designated recreational gold panning area. Incidental recreational panning does occur but it is an activity that the Forest Service does not formally authorize. Generally, the Forest Service does not regulate short-term panning where no surface disturbance is involved. Digging anywhere for material to pan is considered surface disturbance for which Forest Service notification is required.

If you have questions about whether your proposed mining activities require a Notice of Intent or Plan of Operation, please contact one of the program specialists listed on this webpage for further information at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/scnf/landmanagement/resourcemanagement/?cid=stelprdb5366465>.