



# California Regional Water Quality Control Board

## Los Angeles Region



**Linda S. Adams**  
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Environmental Protection

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**Edmund G. Brown Jr**  
Governor

**TO:** Mr. Mark Stopher  
Environmental Program Manager  
California Department of Fish and Game  
601 Locust Street  
Redding, CA 96001

  
**FROM:** Deborah Smith  
Chief Deputy Executive Officer

**DATE:** April 19, 2011

**SUBJECT:** SUCTION DREDGE PROGRAM DRAFT SUBSEQUENT ENVIRONMENTAL  
IMPACT REPORT COMMENTS

Dear Mr. Stopher

We have reviewed the Draft Subsequent Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) which addresses the potential environmental effects of the currently suspended Suction Dredge Permitting Program operated by the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG). We also have reviewed the Proposed Suction Dredge Regulations (Title 14, Section 228 et seq.).

On average, CDFG issued approximately 3,200 suction dredge mining permits to California residents annually for the 15 years prior to the current moratorium established in July 2009. The comparable average number of non-resident suction dredge mining permits issued annually by CDFG was approximately 450. Within the Los Angeles region, most suction dredge mining permits were issued for mining within the San Gabriel River system.

We are extremely concerned about the potential adverse impacts that this activity could have upon water quality and beneficial uses in rivers, streams, lakes and reservoirs throughout the Los Angeles Region and across the state. The United States Environmental Protection Agency's Healthy Watersheds Initiative and the Draft Healthy Watersheds Technical Document (2011) provide clear evidence of recent and ongoing declines in our aquatic resources, showing that two-thirds of the nation's streams are in poor or fair biological condition. Recent studies of the benthic macroinvertebrate community in California's perennial streams support this conclusion. In our opinion, an activity such as suction dredge mining, which extensively modifies the natural

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structure of the aquatic habitat, would be inappropriate within streams or other waterbodies that already are in decline and probably would produce unacceptable adverse impacts within most streams that remain in good condition within the Los Angeles Region. Therefore, we recommend closing all streams in the Los Angeles Region to suction dredging.

The Draft SEIR identifies several potential adverse impacts to water quality resulting from suction dredge mining activities. Adverse impacts include contaminant discharges from onshore dredge site encampments, increased levels of turbidity and total suspended solids, and resuspension of mercury, other trace metals and trace organic compounds (e.g., pesticides).

The Draft SEIR characterizes adverse impacts to water quality associated with contaminant discharges from onshore encampments and increased levels of turbidity and total suspended solids downstream from suction dredging operations as "Less than Significant". Unfortunately, this characterization is based upon very little quantitative data. Los Angeles Regional Board staff believes that these adverse impacts could be significant in many cases, particularly within water bodies that already are degraded, as well as in high quality water bodies ("reference" quality waters).

The Draft SEIR characterizes adverse impacts to water quality associated with resuspension of mercury and other trace metals as "Significant and Unavoidable". Los Angeles Regional Board staff agrees that these impacts would be significant and unavoidable. Although the Draft SEIR suggests that adverse impacts to water quality associated with resuspension of trace organic compounds would be "Less than Significant", there is very little data available to characterize existing concentrations of these contaminants in freshwater sediments. Los Angeles Regional Board staff believes that these adverse impacts could be significant in some cases.

The Draft SEIR states that suction dredging activity was found to have short-term, localized adverse impacts on the local invertebrate abundance and community composition in the water bodies where this activity occurs. These impacts were characterized as "Less than Significant". However, the Draft SEIR does not present any monitoring data to support this conclusion. Los Angeles Regional Board staff believes that there would be widespread and significant adverse impacts to the benthic macroinvertebrate community in streams, due to the extensive movement of boulders and cobbles by hand within stream reaches and the subsequent removal and redeposition of bottom material associated with suction dredging activities. Los Angeles Regional Board staff does not believe that this potentially significant adverse impact was addressed adequately in the Draft SEIR. This should be analyzed in much greater detail in the document.

The Los Angeles Regional Board recommends that the proposed Suction Dredge Regulations be modified as follows:

- Classification of Los Angeles County waters (starting on page 33) – all lakes, reservoirs, rivers and streams within Los Angeles County should be classified as Class A (No dredging permitted at any time).
- Classification of Ventura County waters (starting on page 67) – all lakes, reservoirs, rivers and streams within Ventura County should be classified as Class A (No dredging permitted at any time).

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft SEIR and the new Proposed Suction Dredge Regulations. If you have any questions, please telephone Michael Lyons at (213) 576-6718 as he is the staff person most familiar with these issues.