

In Search Of Gold: Panning, Dredging and Mining ROG 16-112 2/2020

A Golden Legacy

The Stanislaus National Forest Supervisor's Office is located in Sonora, a Gold Rush town originally established by Mexican settlers. When gold was discovered in the area, Sonora's lush agricultural land was immediately overrun with prospectors in search of the precious metal. The name Sonora means "Queen of the Southern Mines."



Today, California's Gold Rush theme is far from dead, although the area was believed thoroughly combed by the miners. Visitors to the forest who like to explore a bit of history can search for this famous ore. The following information briefly explains what you need to know before you start your search, whether you're planning a weekend gold panning trip, interested in obtaining a dredging permit or filing a mining claim.

Gold Panning

Gold panning is the easiest form of mineral exploration on the forest and is permissible in certain areas, if not withdrawn from mineral entry. Mineral gathering activities in wilderness areas, however, must be for scientific or educational purposes and requires written approval. Please contact a district ranger office before considering gold panning in a wilderness area. You cannot file a mining claim in an area withdrawn from mineral entry. You cannot pan for gold on an existing placer claim. Before you begin your gold panning adventure, stop by the ranger district office nearest the area you would like to pan. Get as much information regarding the area you plan to enter.

Where's the best place to pan?

There are more than 800 miles of rivers and streams meandering through the forest. Select an area where you feel most comfortable, perhaps a place where you can camp and fish. Maps of the Stanislaus National Forest that outline rivers, streams, campgrounds and other useful info are available at Forest Service Offices in Sonora, Groveland, Summit and Calaveras ranger districts.

The main thing to remember while panning is to remain patient and to not expect instant success. Gold is the heaviest mineral and it is easily distinguished from other materials. When panning is done properly, gold will settle in the bottom of the pan. If it floats, it's not gold, but probably one of the mica group of minerals tinted a golden color.

Gold Dredging

Dredging, or using a machine to scoop sand and dirt underwater so that it can be checked for gold particles, is prohibited in California. A state law, effective August 2009, prohibits the use of vacuum or suction dredge equipment in any California river, stream or lake, regardless of whether the operator has an existing permit issued by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

No dredging is allowed on any waterway within the forest. The state moratorium on suction dredge mining will remain in effect until the Department of Fish and Wildlife completes a court-ordered permitting program, or updates existing regulations. The court-ordered environmental review required by the California Environmental Quality Act is currently underway. Therefore, as long as the state moratorium is in effect, no dredging is allowed on any waterway located within the forest.

For more information about existing permits, contact California Department of Fish and Wildlife at (559) 243-4005.



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ROG 16-112; 2/2020

Mining Claims

Some modern-day prospectors like to do more extensive mineral exploration and file mining claims where valuable minerals are discovered. There are several things you should know before you start. Use of any motorized equipment, including suction dredges and motorized sluice boxes, is prohibited in wilderness areas and the wild portion of wild and scenic rivers. Resource officers at the Forest Supervisor's Office can provide more information.

Prospectors should also remember that some areas of privately owned land still exist throughout the forest. Claims may not be staked there without permission of the landowner. Check forest maps to make sure your proposed claim is not located on private land. It is your responsibility to ensure you are not on private land.

If you believe a valuable mineral exists where no claim has been filed, you may file a claim to protect your interests in the mineral value.

How can you tell whether a mining claim has already been filed? The Bureau of Land Management and county recorder's office can assist you. If no claim has been filed, you'll need to file a Location Notice to record the claim with the county recorder's office and the BLM.

Claims must be recorded with the BLM. A filing fee is required. Prospectors must remember that a mining claim does not grant title to the land. The land within the claim remains public land and is open for public use. Visitors can still recreate - meaning hike, camp or fish - on a claim. Filing a claim protects the miner's interest in the mineral value associated with the claim.

A Notice of Intent must be filed with the Forest Service to determine if the proposed mining operation may cause a significant surface disturbance to the environment. If so, a Plan of Operation must be filed and approved prior to beginning any activities.

Once you have a claim, you must file an annual "proof of labor" report demonstrating that at least \$100 worth of labor or improvements has been made to the area in question during the past year. This report must be filed with the BLM in Sacramento, and with the county recorder's office. The report must be filed by December each year or you may lose your claim. Mining claims may be bought, sold, willed or inherited.



For more information on filing claims on federal land, contact the BLM office in Sacramento at 2800 Cottage Way, Suite W-1834, Sacramento, CA 95825-1886. You may also call them at (916) 978-4600.

To learn more about a specific Ranger District, contact the one of the offices below:

Stanislaus National Forest Supervisor's Office

19777 Greenley Road
Sonora, CA 95370
(209) 532-3671

Calaveras Ranger District

5519 Hwy 4
PO Box 500
Hathaway Pines, CA 95323
(209) 795-1381

Summit Ranger District

#1 Pinecrest Lake Road
Pinecrest, CA 95364
(209) 965-3434

Groveland Ranger District

24545 Hwy 120
Groveland, CA 95321
(209) 962-7825