Alaska Region Gets Training Course in Placer Mining, Water Quality

By Juliette Wilson

When the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (PL 96-487) was passed in December 1980, millions of acres of federal land were designated national parks and monuments. At the time the act was passed, numerous placer and lode mining claims existed within and near what became national park area boundaries. Many of these claims were being worked until the National Park Service was sued in late 1985 for its alleged failure to properly regulate mining activities in Alaska. Placer mining, the recovery of gold from stream-bed materials, involves activities that seriously alter a stream channel as well as the quality of the water flowing through it. Regulations exist that are designed to protect that water quality, but enforcement to date has been neither consistent nor comprehensive.

In recognition of the need for a better understanding of the placer mining impacts that brought about the lawsuit, the effects of mining on water quality, and enforcement of the pertinent regulations, the NPS Alaska Regional Office staged a training course on the topic for park employees in the region. The course was held May 13-16 at the University of Alaska campus in Anchorage. Course participants included NPS resource managers and environmental specialists from the regional office and from national park areas in Alaska. Representatives from various state and other federal agencies connected with water quality and/or placer mining were also in attendance.

Wide Range Covered

The course covered a wide range of topics, including techniques for assessing water quality; the impacts of placer mining on water quality, aquatic life and aquatic habitat; legal considerations, standards, and criteria; strategies for developing water quality monitoring programs for streams affected by placer mining; water treatment technologies for placer mine operations; and reclamation of mined areas. Course attendees also participated in field and laboratory sessions designed to provide "hands-on" experience with monitoring equipment and techniques as well as some of the less complicated laboratory analyses. In addition to NPS specialists, course instructors included experts from Alaska state agencies and the University of Alaska who maintain close involvement with placer mining effects and regulations as a part of their regular work.

The training course ended with separate presentations by a mining industry representative and by an environmental activist, both of whom subsequently joined four other presenters in a panel discussion of placer mine operation and regulation.

Guest Experts Participate

The course was hosted by the NPS Alaska Re the NPS Water Resources Division in Fort Collins, Colo. Bill Lawrence, Environmental Protection Specialist with ARO, served as course coordinator. Lawrence and hydrologists Mark Flora and Sam Kunkle (WRD) designed the course, and Juliette Wilson (WRD/Colorado State University support staff) assisted in course coordination efforts. Other significant course planning efforts came from Bub Loiselle, Placer Mining Coordinator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Seattle); Rick Inglis, Hydrologist, WRD; Barbara West, Environmental Protection Specialist, WRD; Nancy Deschu, Research Scientist, Denver Service Center; and Ross Kavanagh, Fisheries Biologist, ARO.

Wilson is on the support staff of the NPS Water Resources Division, Fort Collins, CO.



***Mark Oswood of the Institute** of Arctic Biology, University of Alaska, identifies stream-dwelling insects for trainees.*



***Trainees learn to use stream gauging equipment.** Rick Inglis, NPS Water Resources Division, (2nd from right) instructs.*



***Bub Loiselle of the Environmental Protection Agency** demonstrates proper collection of a "grab" sample.*