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Logging companies ordered to report water use in controlling dust

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Logging companies in the Sierra Nevada and elsewhere in California will now be required to report how much water they extract from streams for dust control.

The California Board of Forestry adopted the emergency regulations in response to the drought. The action arose from concerns that very low water flows in many mountain streams could be further depleted by water extractions related to logging.

Logging companies commonly draw water from streams to fill tanker trucks, which then spray the water on dirt roads to control dust. Known as water drafting, the procedure is intended to protect animals, vegetation and people from the dust generated by heavy logging trucks.

Existing regulations require logging companies to report their water use only in streams where salmon or steelhead fish are present. They are also required to obtain stream alteration permits from the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. The new regulations, which became effective June 19, extend those requirements to all other streams in California.

The central and southern Sierra Nevada are two regions where the new regulations are expected to have the most effect.

“We’re very concerned about low water flows due to the drought, and we do not want to see the streams further impacted by water drafting,” said George Gentry, the board’s executive officer. “Water levels are so low that it could have a serious impact on biological resources and downstream users. We have to be very cautious about how much water we pull out right now.”

A landowner engaged in timber harvesting will now be required to report the location of a water drafting operation, the volume and methods of water diversion, the location and frequency of water use, and other information. Some of this information is already reported to the State Water Resources Control Board when it involves an existing water diversion permit, but such reporting is infrequent and often incomplete.

The new requirements apply only to new timber harvest plans, Gentry said. But property owners with previously approved plans are required by law to constantly review their logging operations in response to changing environmental conditions, which include drought. So approved timber harvest plans may be



bound by the new rules as well, although whether to report water drafting activity is up to the forester in charge of the logging operation.

“It’s kind of a gray area,” Gentry said. “We are asking all landowners to evaluate whether or not they need to provide additional information in light of the drought. They have to exercise professional judgment.”

The rules do not order any water drafting to be reduced or halted. But that could happen later. State officials will use the reported information to decide whether permission will be granted to continue water drafting.

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