

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 6, 2014

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Kerry:

This week's failure of the Mount Polley tailings pond dam in British Columbia validates fears Alaska fishermen have regarding Canada's proposed development of large-scale hardrock mineral mines near transboundary rivers with Alaska.

According to media reports, this massive breach released an estimated 2.6 billion gallons of water and 6 million cubic yards of sands, contaminated with tons of copper, nickel, arsenic and lead. It prompted a local state of emergency and ban on water uses downstream. Reports that the dam failure followed repeated warnings from the B.C. Ministry of Environment raise serious questions about provincial permitting and oversight of this industry.

While not directly affecting streams flowing through Alaska, this failure may affect salmon stocks managed under the bilateral Pacific Salmon Treaty. A similar failure at mines proposed the near Unuk, Stikine and Taku Rivers would directly affect fishery stocks upon which commercial and recreational fishermen depend, as well as the subsistence and cultural needs of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people of my state.

In April, Alaska's congressional delegation wrote of our concerns about proposed development of mines along these transboundary rivers. We emphasized the need to protect the valuable marine resources that contribute to the economy and culture of Southeast Alaska, and requested the Department of State raise these issues in appropriate bilateral meetings with your Canadian counterparts.

Given the catastrophic failure of the Mount Polley tailings pond dam, I urge you to redouble these efforts and demand a thorough investigation into the cause of this disaster and its aftermath. Additionally, with approval now pending for the Kerr Sulphurets Mitchell (KSM) mine near Ketchikan, I request you urge the Canadian federal government to conduct a Panel Review of this proposed development before final approval.

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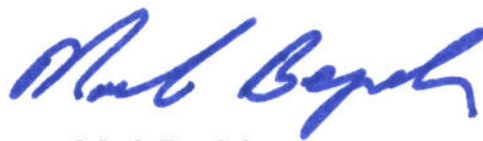
I remain supportive of responsible mining activities in Southeast Alaska, including existing operations at the Greens Creek and Kensington mines as well as the proposed Niblack and Bokan projects. Yet this massive tailings pond failure raises serious questions that must be addressed. Just as our federal government conducted a scientific review of the broader watershed implications of large scale mining activity such as the proposed Pebble Mine in Southwest Alaska, we should demand the same from our neighbors.

I remind you of the economic importance of the waters of Southeast Alaska. Fishermen landed a record harvest of 95 million pink salmon in 2013 which, combined with other salmon species, was valued at nearly \$220 million. Tourism brings about 1 million visitors to Southeast each year, many attracted by the recreational fishing opportunities for salmon and halibut. These visitors spent \$1.1 billion in 2013, and created 10,900 jobs that generated \$407 million in income and millions more in state and local tax revenues.

In addition, Alaska Native communities throughout Southeast are dependent on these same fishery resources, marine mammals and waterfowl to meet their subsistence needs. Their food security and very survival depend on keeping these waters healthy.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. As chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and the Coast Guard, I intend to hold a hearing on this issue. Please do not hesitate to contact my office if you need additional information.

Sincerely,



Mark Begich
United States Senator