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Pain of Mount Polley spill felt in New Brunswick

Written by Tracy Glynn on August 18, 2017

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Jacinda Mack delivering a petition signed by 40,000 people calling for justice for the Mount Polley spill to Minister of Natural Resources Jim Carr on August 15, 2017 at the Mining Ministers' meeting in St. Andrews, NB. Photo by Ugo Lapointe.

Ekpahak/Fredericton – Jacinda Mack, a Nuxalk and Secwepemc woman from British Columbia, was on the unceded Wolastoq and Passamaquoddy territories in New Brunswick in August to intervene at the [annual meeting of Ministers responsible for mining](#) and to meet with indigenous communities and those concerned with the proposed Sisson mine near Stanley. Mack is a survivor of the catastrophic Mount Polley mine waste spill in the Quesnel watershed, home of birthing waters of salmon and other fish.

The Mount Polley spill, what the industry and government dubbed an “impossible event,” occurred in the middle of the night on August 4, 2014. Mack said the breach of the tailings dam sounded like jet engines flying overhead. An estimated 24 billion litres of toxic slurry of mud and water, scoured old growth forest for 10 kilometres. Mack described the affected area: “Willow trees that grow everywhere weren’t growing in the creekside.”

No one was killed in the largest tailings spill in North American history unlike the world’s largest tailings spill that happened about a year after the Mount Polley spill. The Samarco tailings disaster in Brazil on November 5, 2015 killed 19 people, devastated the River Doce and spilled into the Atlantic Ocean.

For Mack and the people of Xat’sùll First Nation, the spill was received as a death in the community: “Our people are grieving. My grandchildren will never know what it’s like to swim and fish in Quesnel Lake. That’s their inheritance, part of our bloodline now.”

There has been a three-year fight to have Imperial Metals, the company behind the Mount Polley tailings spill, fined for numerous violations to British Columbia and Canadian laws protecting fish and water. Mack said it was up to her mother, Bev Sellars, former Chief of the Xat'sull First Nation, to file charges as a private citizen in the eleventh hour, before the three-year time limit was up for fining the company for the incident.

“Our economy walks on the land and swims in the river,” Mack quoted her mother while showing a picture of Sellars dip net fishing in the Quesnel watershed in 1980. The mine has been permitted to continue dumping their waste into Quesnel Lake by the B.C. government.

Mack, coordinator of First Nation Women Advocating Responsible Mining, was part of a delegation organized by the Conservation Council of New Brunswick and MiningWatch Canada that hand-delivered a [petition](#) with 40,000 signatures calling for justice for the Mount Polley spill to Minister of Natural Resources Jim Carr at the Ministers’ meeting in St. Andrews on August 14.

Joining Mack at the Ministers’ meeting was Wolastoq Grand Council Chief Ron Tremblay and Ramona Nicholas, one of the Wolastoqiyik grandmothers who has set up a camp where the Sisson tungsten and molybdenum mine’s tailings pond is proposed to be built.

The Sisson project proposes to build a modified centreline dam, similar to the Mount Polley dam that failed. According to a [new report](#) by Dr. David Chambers of the Center for Science in Public Participation, there are several concerns with the current design of the Sisson tailings pond that have yet to be addressed by the provincial and federal governments in their approval of the mine’s environmental assessments.



Jacinda Mack, fourth from the left, and the Wolastoqiyik grandmothers at their camp site at the proposed Sisson mine site. Photo from Jacinda Mack.

The Wolastoqiyik grandmothers have dug a well and plan to build two more at their camp site. Nicholas said the camp is not just about opposing the mine but reconnecting with the land, which is the traditional hunting territory of the Wolastoqiyik people, home to food and medicines. The camp has received support from the community in form of cash, food and water donations. Mack visited the grandmothers at the camp on August 15.

“I want to be able to look my children and grandchildren in the eye and to say I did all I could to protect the land and water,” said Mack who left her home near Williams Lake (currently surrounded by raging forest fires) to share her community’s struggles with mining.

A grandmother in the audience at Mack’s talk on August 14 at St. Mary’s First Nation Cultural Centre expressed frustration: “I’m just a grandmother. What can I do to stop the mine and spraying of the forest? The corporations are so powerful.” Joan Green, a retired teacher from Fredericton, responded that people in New Brunswick were able to stop shale gas.

Mack shared specifics of the Mount Polley tailings disaster in attempt to stop another “Mount Polley” from happening while also reminding her audiences to not forget about the love that is crucial to every struggle. Mack said her love story is about salmon fishing with her son: “It’s a struggle but it’s also about love. Don’t forget your love story. With every love story, there’s heartache.”

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