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Opinions

Alaska, Canada must safeguard fisheries from B.C. mining operations

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Fishing boats rest at the dock in the boat harbor in Kodiak on Friday, January 4, 2013. (Bob Hallinen /ADN archive 2013)

Legislators and fishing representatives may appear to have very different jobs, but the reality is that we are both charged with looking out for the best interests of the hard-working people we represent. One issue of mutual concern is making sure Alaska communities do not suffer harm from Canadian mines under development in our shared watersheds. And, should the unthinkable occur, we want the responsible parties to clean up the mess and reimburse any losses. Currently, Alaska has no binding agreement with Canada to ensure that happens.

The third anniversary of the Mount Polley mine failure that sent 6.6 billion gallons of water and tailings into the Fraser River watershed is an important reminder of what can go terribly wrong, but is only one example of why Alaska, British Columbia, and our federal governments must develop a robust plan to mitigate any potential damages.

[Alaska and B.C.: Salmon, clean water and good neighbors]

Like Alaska, Montana has a non-binding cooperative agreements with British Columbia covering a transboundary watershed. Open-pit coal mines sit in the headwaters of the Elk-Kootenai River system that flows from British Columbia to Montana. Since 1984, the water has become so toxic that it's harmed U.S. fish stocks. The U.S. Congress invested \$3 million for research that revealed a flawed water assessment program. A \$100 million state-of-the-art water treatment system failed and plans for a \$600 million replacement are on hold. In the face of documented, chronic pollution, B.C. officials refused to require meaningful corrective measures from the mine operators, but they did allow four mine expansions.

Last year, British Columbia's auditor general highlighted inadequacies in monitoring of the mines programs, stating there are "too few resources, infrequent inspections, and (a) lack of enforcement." She expressed significant concern about a \$1 billion shortfall in B.C.'s mine reclamation fund.

Canadian economist Robin Allyn provided a powerful briefing to the Alaska State Legislature this year that underscores the need for financial assurances. She emphasized Canadian taxpayers subsidized \$40 million of the Mount Polley cleanup to date and "... liabilities in BC are underestimated and most mine operators are not required to provide full-funding for the reclamation."

British Columbia does not have the means to sufficiently monitor mines and enforce the law, much less fill the funding gaps left when mining companies walk away from their responsibilities. A prime example is the Tulsequah Chief mine near Juneau, which has been leaching acid runoff since the 1950s.

The Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell (KSM) gold and copper project site is located in the Unuk River watershed about twenty miles from Alaska. Huge tailings dams will be placed near the Nass River; two creeks will be destroyed and resident fish stocks relocated. Once in operation, KSM will be the largest open-pit mine in North America.

[British Columbia officials try to smooth over mining dispute during Juneau trip]

Transboundary rivers are important to both Alaska and Canadian fishermen. In recent years the troll fishery has been managed to help boost Unuk River king salmon. This year, low productivity of Southeast king salmon forced restrictions in all fisheries, with some anglers and all trollers standing down for large periods of the season. The Taku, Stikine and Nass rivers are subject to the Pacific Salmon Treaty and fisheries are managed accordingly. Red Chris and other large mines along the Stikine River pose risks to long-term water quality, as does the abandoned Tulsequah Chief in the Taku River drainage. Any negative impacts will reverberate across the region and state.

Southeast Alaska is home to seven of the nation's top fishing ports; more resident commercial fishermen and processors live here than anywhere else in Alaska. Seafood provides 20 percent of the region's jobs and injects \$1 billion into Alaska's economy each year. Guided sportfishing, personal use, and subsistence fishermen number in

the thousands and these important users also contribute significantly to the state's economic and social well-being.

The state of Alaska and fishermen on both sides of the border take great pains to protect the fish they harvest, yet the B.C. government is adding risk during the most vulnerable stages of the salmon life cycle. So far there is no commitment that habitat remediation will occur, or that Alaska's losses will be covered in the event of catastrophic mine failure, toxic leaching, persistent pollution, or other mine-related disturbances that could occur in any of these critical watersheds.

This is as much an economic issue as an environmental one for Alaska and the people we represent. It is imperative that we secure binding financial commitments between the United States and Canadian governments to protect the citizens of this state and British Columbia.

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The views expressed here are the writers' and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch News, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, email commentary@alaskadispatch.com. Send submissions shorter than 200 words to letters@alaskadispatch.com.

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