

Mount Polley threat remains

Jacinda Mack / Prince George Citizen

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Guest Editorial

It is three years today since Mount Polley Mine's massive tailings dam collapsed, creating the biggest, most destructive mining waste disaster in Canadian history: 26 billion litres of waste rock, polluted water, heavy metals, and processing chemicals were dumped into drinking water and salmon bearing headwaters of the Fraser River watershed.

First Nations and other communities living in the footprint of this Imperial Metals mine still live with the fear of the damage done and the ongoing risks- to the fervent denials of the company.

The good news is the new B.C. government appears to have very different views from the old "mining first" Liberals. NDP Premier John Horgan and Green Party leader Andrew Weaver have embraced the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Rights, including free prior and informed consent. They have made positive statements about the environment and doing mining right.

While this may be encouraging for B.C., there needs to be a national response to the serious flaws in the entire mining system exposed by Mount Polley. Our "local" fears should be shared by everyone in Canada who lives where massive mining and tailing ponds exist or are being proposed, and by anyone who cares about the environment.

The Aug. 4, 2014, collapse was national and international headline news - billed as a wake-up call to the mining industry and the governments who are supposed to regulate it. Today it seems largely forgotten. Or it is assumed everything has been fixed. It has not.

Promises were made after the disaster to make mining dams safe. They should have been made in earnest and kept to the letter, especially considering an expert panel warned that, without comprehensive reforms, B.C. alone could expect two such collapses every decade.

And to hear the B.C. mines minister tell it when marking last year's second anniversary, everything was indeed done and there was no longer any cause for concern.

The facts, and Liberal government actions, tell a very different story. B.C. has not fixed the problems. (And if everything has been glossed over here, how well do you think the industry and other jurisdictions have performed?)

For example, an analysis by mining expert David Chambers found that key expert panel recommendations were ignored, or only partially accepted, leaving risks and bad practices in place. Business as usual.

No charges have been laid for the dam collapse, and some deadlines run out today, even though authorities immediately suspected laws had been broken.

And despite the objections of my First Nation and others, and of municipalities, the B.C. Liberals recently permitted Mount Polley to discharge waste water into our rivers, lakes and groundwater. It did not even force the company to provide a proven water treatment plant.

The same Liberals worked enthusiastically with Imperial Metals to resume full Mount Polley operations as quickly as possible - without, it seems, checking too closely into their plans and projections.

Imperial Metals recently reported that ores for Mount Polly (and its new sister mine Red Chris) were not as rich as predicted. The company will not meet its debt financing obligations and will have to design new plans to move the mines forward.

Did anyone check the ore estimates and other data company used to justify their mines being approved or was its word just accepted? Can anyone have confidence that, moving forward, safety will be the top priority?

Freedom of Information documents, just published by The Tyee, indicate the Liberal government's priority from Day 1 was to protect mining. For example, in an email to communications and other staff Premier Clark wrote: "We have a few new mines coming on stream and we don't want anything to get in the way of that."

For good reason, we live in fear that once again, Mount Polley has been granted permission without knowing what their next move will be. And if this is what happened in B.C., where the disaster happened, imagine how easy a ride the mining industry had in other provinces and from the federal government.

This is why B.C.'s First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining (FNWARM) is coordinating water ceremonies by groups across B.C. and Canada today. We want to send a message to the provincial mines ministers' August meeting in New Brunswick that real action must be taken, through reforms to the Fisheries Act, and to mining regulations.

It is a message the ministers must hear and heed if we are to put an end to Aug. 4 as an annual day of fear and mourning for those who live near mines, their waste facilities, or on the waters they threaten.

-- Jacinda Mack is a member of Xat'sull First Nation and the coordinator for First Nation's Women Advocating Responsible Mining.

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