

# Mount Polley Mine tailings water 'very close' to drinking quality, company says

**Imperial Metals president Brian Kynoch says he would drink water from tailings pond that leaked into rivers**

By Rhiannon Coppin, Bal Brach, [CBC News](#) | Posted: Aug 05, 2014 8:07 AM PT | Last Updated: Aug 05, 2014 10:05 PM PT

Imperial Metals president Brian Kynoch says the company accepts full responsibility for the breach that caused a massive failure at the Mount Polley Mine in central B.C. on Monday and sent billions of litres of wastewater into river systems.

"I apologize for what happened," Kynoch said at a news conference plagued with technical problems in Likely, B.C., on Tuesday afternoon. "If you asked me two weeks ago if this could have happened, I would have said it couldn't."

Wastewater and tailings sediment from Imperial Metals's Mount Polley copper and gold mine near Likely has contaminated several lakes, creeks and rivers in the Cariboo region, causing officials to evacuate local campgrounds and enact a number of water-use and drinking water bans.

When asked why the dam failed, sending an estimated 10 billion litres of water and 4.5 million cubic metres of metals-laden fine sand into Polley Lake, Kynoch said, "Until we conduct an investigation, I would just be speculating."

Several times while he was speaking, Kynoch was interrupted by questions from concerned residents who wanted to know the extent of the environmental impact of the spill.

"This is a gut-wrenching experience, I can assure you it is for me," he responded. "I don't know why it happened."

Kynoch said the company needs a few more days to see what the outcome of the breach will be. "The crews have been asked to stay home because we're not operating the mine," he said.

Residents repeatedly asked Kynoch about the quality of the contaminated water. Kynoch insisted the water quality is good, even saying he would drink it.

"It's very close to drinking water quality, the water in our tailings," he said. "There's almost everything in it but at low levels.... No mercury, very low arsenic and very low other metals."

### **Repeated government warnings**

Meanwhile, the B.C. Ministry of Environment says it warned Imperial Metals about the Mount Polley mine tailings pond levels repeatedly before this week's devastating breach.

In an email to CBC News, ministry spokesperson Kim Franklin said the ministry gave the firm its latest of five warnings in May, this time for exceeding the permitted height of wastewater within the tailings pond.

The company, Franklin writes, has applied for two permit amendments in recent years to allow the mine to discharge an increasing amount of wastewater.

The first of these, in 2009, prompted an [independent report](#). The second, submitted this summer, was under consideration by the ministry at the time of the tailings pond breach.

- [\*\*\*Click here for a full report on the Mount Polley mine's environmental record\*\*\*](#)

B.C. Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett says he is devoting every appropriate resource to deal with the consequences of Monday's spill.

"This is a serious incident that should not have happened," he said in a written statement. "We will determine the cause of the event and we are determined to prevent an incident like this from happening again."

The ministry said the vast quantity of mining waste materials may have flowed out through Hazeltine Creek and into Quesnel Lake.

The regional district and local health authority issued a precautionary water ban, advising visitors and residents not to drink or bathe in the water of affected areas, and not to allow animals to drink the water, either.

---

### **Drinking water and water use bans:**

- Quesnel Lake.
- Polley Lake.
- Hazeltine Creek.
- Cariboo Creek.
- Quesnel and Cariboo river systems, right up to mouths at Fraser River.

Note: The ban currently does not apply to people in Williams Lake or other towns along the Fraser River.

*Source: Cariboo Regional District, B.C. Ministry of Energy and Mines*

Personnel from the province's Environment Ministry have taken water samples, which are being sent for analysis, Bennett said.

In a statement released Tuesday morning, Imperial Metals said that the area of the breach had stabilized and no injuries had been reported.

"Our first priority is the health and safety of our employees and neighbours, and we are relieved no loss of life or injury have been reported," the Vancouver-based company said. "We are deeply concerned and are working to mitigate immediate effects and understand the cause."

The company said the tailings are not acid-generating and the water is alkaline with a pH of roughly 8.5, but it could not confirm the exact quantity and composition of the discharged wastewater.



An aerial view of the Mount Polley Mine tailings pond shows the area where the earthen wall gave way early Monday morning. (Cariboo Regional District/Facebook)

In [filings made to Canada's National Pollutant Release Inventory in 2013](#) — which is only one year's worth of data, but gives some idea of what the mine's byproducts are — Imperial Metals recorded disposing of quantities of arsenic, lead, manganese, cobalt, mercury and other harmful mining byproducts.

---

**Mount Polley mine on-site disposal in 2013:**

- Arsenic (and its compounds): 406 tonnes
- Lead (and its compounds) 177 tonnes
- Nickel (and its compounds) 326 tonnes
- Vanadium (except when in an alloy): 5,047 tonnes
- Zinc (and its compounds): 2,169 tonnes
- Cadmium (and its compounds): 6 tonnes
- Cobalt (and its compounds): 475 tonnes
- Phosphorus (total): 41,640 tonnes
- Copper (and its compounds): 18,413 tonnes
- Antimony (and its compounds) 14 tonnes
- Manganese (and its compounds): 20,988 tonnes
- Mercury (and its compounds): 3 tonnes
- Selenium (and its compounds): 46 tonnes

*Source: NPRI*

---

The company also said it is working closely with emergency response officials and provincial ministries, and that it has notified its insurers of the incident.

Imperial Metals, an exploration and mine development and operation company, operates the Mount Polley copper and gold mine in British Columbia and the Sterling gold mine in Nevada.

News of the failure of the tailings pond dam sent shares of Imperial Metals plunging by 44 per cent in morning trading on the TSX. The stock slid \$7.43 to \$9.47 in heavy trading.

The company also holds a 50 per cent stake in the Huckleberry copper mine and a 50 per cent stake in the Ruddock Creek lead and zinc property, both of which are in B.C., and is in the process of developing the Red Chris copper and gold property in B.C.