

# Island Voices: B.C. must heed the Brazilian mine disaster

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An aerial view after a dam collapsed near Brumadinho, Brazil, Friday, Jan. 25, 2019. Brazilian mining company Vale SA said it didn't yet have information on deaths or injuries at the dam but said that tailings have reached the community of Vila Ferteco. (Bruno Correia/Nitro via AP)

British Columbians should pay careful attention to last month's catastrophe at the mine tailings dam in Brumadinho, Brazil. We must not forget the tragic scenes as firefighters carried away 157 body bags — and searched desperately in the muck for another 180 missing people. This can happen when governments fail to respond to clear warnings.

About five years ago, both B.C. and Brazil got dramatic warnings of the danger that tailings dams pose. In 2014, the Mount Polley Mine dam collapsed — creating one of Canada's most epic environmental disasters. Only 15 months later, a tailings dam in Mariana, Brazil, collapsed — wiping out a neighbourhood, killing 19 and poisoning a vast watershed. Fish leapt out of the river to flap on the banks, trying to escape lethal effluent.

Mining experts in both B.C. and Brazil called for stricter regulation of dams. But neither government responded adequately.

In Brazil, where investigating politicians had received donations from the mining company, little changed. The latest disaster is the result.

Meanwhile in B.C., after the Mount Polley disaster, government appointed an expert panel to investigate. After extensive study, the panel sternly warned British Columbians about tailings dams:

"If the inventory of active tailings dams in the province remains unchanged, and performance in the future reflects that in the past, then on average there will be two failures every 10 years and six every 30. In the face of these prospects, the panel firmly rejects any notion that business as usual can continue."

The B.C. panel made a number of recommendations, and some have been implemented — including an important requirement that mines have an independent tailings-review board.

However, B.C. has failed to implement two key panel recommendations:

- To safely retire half of B.C.'s 123 active tailings dams; and
- To move to eliminate the "century old technology" of tailings storage lakes at new mines.

Despite these recommendations, it's mostly business as usual. B.C. industry continues to propose — and government continues to approve — the archaic storage-pond technology. Government is ignoring the panel's call to "aggressively pursue" alternative tailings disposal.

As a result, four massive new and proposed mines in northwest B.C. will still use tailings lakes and dams. Disturbingly, each of those mines will generate between six and 27 times more waste than Mount Polley. Worse, much of that waste will be far more toxic than Mount Polley's — and far more dangerous to fish and environment.

B.C. also continues to ignore another key panel recommendation. The panel noted that the main reason industry doesn't adopt safer tailings disposal is because it increases industry's short-term costs. So it recommended that safety considerations (not short-term costs) must determine the type of disposal approved.

According to the panel, decision-makers must recognize that tailings ponds are cheaper for companies in the short term — but massively expensive for taxpayers who clean up eventual disasters.

Respected mining expert David Chambers analyzed the four new B.C. mines described above. His troubling conclusion is that none of them meet the panel recommendations to (1) reduce the risk of tailings dam failure and (2) prioritize public safety.

Things must change. B.C. must avoid Brazil's mistake, and not wait for history to repeat itself. To prevent another Mount Polley, government must improve its rules on mine tailings storage.

Premier Horgan must act now to protect the workers and communities below tailings dams. He must act to protect the taxpayers who will pay for future disasters. Finally, he must act to protect our wild salmon and trout, eagles and bears, pristine streams and sparkling lakes.

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