

# Review of the Auditor-Generals' report of environmental regulatory framework

It was only three years ago that the Imperial Metals Corporation tailings dam failed.

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It was only three years ago that the Imperial Metals Corporation tailings dam failed in British Columbia's Cariboo region.

It contaminated drinking water for the community of Likely, B.C., near Williams Lake and heavily impacted the environment. This dam breach released years of accumulated mining waste, equivalent to approximately 25 million cubic meters. The wastewater poured into Hazeltine Creek and spilled into Polley Lake and Quesnel Lake. Once in the system, the mine waste travelled a considerable distance — likely as far as the Fraser River.

This triggered the BC Auditor-General, Carol Bellringer, to lead a two-year investigation into the Mount Polley disaster and the role of the Ministry of Energy and Mines and the Ministry of Environment. The report, released in May 2016, critically evaluated the two ministries' roles in relation to mining activities, provincial regulations, and enforcement programs in place to protect the province from environmental risks. The report revealed some important and disturbing messages concerning the current and future health of British Columbia. The audit found that the compliance and

enforcement programs of both ministries' were inadequate in protecting the province from potential serious environmental harm.

The Ministry of Energy and Mines is responsible for what happens inside the mine site and they hold the financial security deposit to ensure the mine against major failures. This is in place so that the taxpayers of B.C. do not end up getting stuck with the bill after a significant cleanup operation. The report concluded that Energy and Mines lack sufficient resources, the tools to manage environmental risks, or enough financial security to cover possible risks. They hold less than half the funds they should have to respond to possible future disasters according to the report. The Ministry of Energy and Mines does not coordinate effectively with the Ministry of Environment.

The Ministry of Environment is responsible for what happens outside the mine site, such as any waste discharge and their quantity and quality. Unfortunately, the Ministry's enforcement and compliance program were found to be ineffective in protecting the province from significant risk. The report concluded that both ministries have not been able to demonstrate that the industries they oversee are following the appropriate regulations. Neither ministry is conducting adequate monitoring or site inspections. The scariest part is that both ministries are aware of their deficiencies yet neither is doing enough to improve them nor are they adequately informing the public or legislators of these issues.

Furthermore, only 10 per cent of mines have water treatment facilities or plan to have them in the future. A huge challenge to the mining industry is the risk of water contamination.

Treatment of a serious disaster may last indefinitely, which is very expensive for the industry, and detrimental on economic, social, and environmental fronts.

Three years later, the Mount Polley mine is back up and running with modified mine operations.

The long-term water management plan for Imperial Metals Corporation was approved this past spring. Knowing the serious issues that our mining oversight institutions face, how can we be confident that mining operations will be conducted in a safe manner without jeopardizing the environment, and not costing the public an arm and a leg when the next accident does occur?

Everyone needs reliable, safe drinking water sources and to ensure this, both ministries need to be holding industry accountable for their actions, and ultimately safeguarding our natural resources for generations to come.

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