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For the Juneau Empire

Recent fishing closures and Tulsequah Chief

Southeast Alaska is facing another year of poor king salmon returns to the Taku and Unuk rivers and, thus, limitations on sport and commercial fishing across the region. The Unuk River hooligan fishery, an important customary and traditional resource, continues to be closed.

These transboundary rivers support valuable fisheries. Directed Chinook fisheries in the Taku have been open only a few times in the last 30 years. This fishery can add almost \$1 million to the regional economy. The Taku River produces about 75 percent of the annual wild king sport catch in the Juneau area.

Alaska is taking significant actions to protect fish stocks in transboundary rivers. For the most part, Alaskans are willing to bear these costs since this is the only way to ensure viable fisheries for the future. Alaska has also done a good job of protecting salmon habitat in these rivers. The Unuk is in a National Monument, the Stikine is in a wilderness area and Taku salmon habitat is in fine shape.

But we need B.C. to also act responsibly to protect salmon habitat on its side of the border. We in Alaska are not willing to bear the brunt of responsible management without reciprocal actions by B.C. But there are serious concerns about habitat on the B.C. side due to aggressive and poorly regulated mining exploration and development.

The poster child for B.C. mining practices is the abandoned Tulsequah Chief Mine in the Taku watershed. For 60 years the mine has been pouring toxic, heavy metal-laden mine drainage into the Taku watershed, the region's most productive salmon river, in violation of the Canadian Fisheries Act and B.C. mine permits and water quality standards.

For 20 years, instead of enforcing the law and halting the illegal pollution, B.C. has hoped that another mining company would reopen the mine and clean it up. This hasn't worked, as two companies have gone bankrupt trying to develop the mine. And a "mine it to clean it up" strategy has worried many on both sides of the border, who see the Tulsequah Chief as the wrong mine in the wrong place; an acid-producing mine in the heart of the Taku watershed, right on the banks of the major tributary to the Taku River, the Tulsequah River.

An Aquatic Ecological Risk Assessment released by the B.C. government in July 2017 documents "unacceptable risks" from the ongoing acid mine drainage from Tulsequah Chief.

B.C. officials have made a number of verbal commitments to stop the acid mine drainage, but as six Alaska legislators wrote last June, "We are concerned because B.C. has given such verbal "assurances" for more than 20 years, yet very little has been done to end the acid runoff."

There is significant opposition to the mine and no visible support for it. The Taku River Tlingit First Nation in B.C. has a formal position opposing the mine, while the Douglas Indian Association and the Organized Village of Kasaan in 2017 passed resolutions calling for cleanup and closure of Tulsequah Chief. In March 2017 Andrew Weaver, leader of the B.C. Green Party, asked then Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett, "Will B.C. keep its word and address the Tulsequah problem with a long overdue proper cleanup, or will it allow yet another mining company to pick up where Chieftain Metals left off and let Tulsequah Chief's controversy, waste and environmental black eye to B.C. continue?"

Alaska Lt. Governor Byron Mallott recently returned from a trip to Ottawa and stated, "Hopefully this will continue to create the kind of focus on the Tulsequah Chief Mine that we raised in the last two years." Alaskans are very supportive of his strong stand on the Tulsequah Chief, but given the history of broken B.C. promises it is vital he keep the pressure up.

Alaska, our congressional delegation and the State Department recently agreed to work together to address threats from upstream mining in B.C. The first major action of this collaboration should be a strong demand that B.C. clean up and close down the Tulsequah Chief, with an understanding that until this is done progress under agreements with B.C. will be difficult.

• **Chris Zimmer is the Alaska Campaign Director for Rivers Without Borders and has been working on Taku Watershed issues since 2001.**

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