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Mining pollution on bilateral agenda

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The ongoing flow of harmful mining contaminants from the Elk Valley into transboundary waterways has been raised during high-level talks between Canada and the United States.

The U.S. Department of State tabled the issue of mining pollution in the shared Kootenai River watershed at a bilateral meeting with Global Affairs Canada in Washington, DC, last Thursday after pressure from the states and environmental groups such as Headwaters Montana.

The U.S. is concerned about mining contaminants, particularly selenium, leaching from Teck Resource's five steelmaking coal mines into the Elk and Fording rivers, which

flow into Lake Koochanusa and Montana's Kootenai River.

Selenium is an essential trace element necessary for cellular function in many organisms, however, excessive amounts may result in toxic effects such as deformities and increased mortality in fish populations.

Last month, *The Free Press* reported Teck provided bottled drinking water to the users of four private wells in the Elk Valley after testing revealed selenium levels above the provincial water guideline.

Well #3 in the District of Sparwood was also shut down.

Headwaters Montana director Dave Hadden said although Memorandums of Understanding on the management of shared waterways existed between B.C. and the adjoining U.S. states, they were "unenforceable" and "unfunded".

"They don't really address the scope and scale of some of these projects and impacts that are ongoing or foreseen," he said.

The countries have different water quality guidelines for selenium and the protection of aquatic life.

"Selenium bioaccumulates, it doesn't just wash through the system," said Hadden.

"We're trying to protect our resources at that level where it's considered safe for aquatic life.

"The other concern is that if B.C. mines exceed our standard for selenium in our watersheds then that precludes some economic development on our side of the border.

“We’re concerned not just environmentally but for the counties and municipalities downstream, that may have some of their options limited by what’s going on in British Columbia.”

Hadden hopes the April 26 bilateral talks will be the first of many on the issue.

“It’s a first step in terms of finding a federal solution,” he said.

The Elk River Alliance (ERA) has welcomed the issue being raised at an international level.

“Elk River Alliance is encouraged to see that the Canadian Federal Government is taking an interest in our watershed health,” said interim executive director Allie Ferguson.

The ERA works with its US counterparts on selenium transport through the Lake Koochanusa Monitoring and Research Committee, which consists of agencies and groups from both countries.

It has called on the US and Canadian governments to communicate the results of their meeting and plans to address mining pollution.

“ERA would like to see better collaboration and communication among the various state, provincial, federal, First Nation and tribal agencies, which will hopefully lead to a clearer understanding of knowledge gaps and the decision-making processes on both sides of the border,” said Ferguson.

“We need assurance that the environmental assessment process and permitting requirements in B.C. are, indeed, contributing to meeting the goal of stabilizing and reducing selenium and other contaminants in the Elk River system.

“If that goal is met, transboundary concerns about selenium and other contaminants will also be addressed.”