



---

**NEWS**

## Mount Polley Disaster Brought Quick Government PR Response, Documents Show

Three-year-old FOI request reveals early belief laws broken and co-ordination with mine owner.



By **Jeremy J. Nuttall**

14 Jul 2017 | TheTyee.ca

---



**While waste still flowed from tailings pond, emails show premier's office was worried about effect on other mine projects.**

---

In the hours after the 2014 Mount Polley mine disaster, authorities were already concerned laws had been broken and the premier's office was worried fallout from the tailing pond breach would “get in the way” of other planned mines, documents provided to The Tyee reveal.

Almost three years after the disaster, and weeks away from a deadline (<http://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/three-year-deadline-to-lay-charges-for-mt-polley-dam-failure-approaching-fast>) to lay charges under B.C.'s environment act, no charges have been laid and no fines levied.

The government's initial reaction to the dam's collapse is revealed in hundreds of pages of emails and other communications obtained through a freedom of information request and provided to The Tyee by Jessica Ross, an independent researcher and member of the BC Freedom of Information and Privacy Association.

Ross said she filed the FOI request almost three years ago and only received the documents July 4.

An email exchange between Staff Sgt. Kelly Dahl of the province's Conservation Officer Service major investigations unit and Sgt. Richard Lebeuf of the Williams Lake RCMP documents raised concerns laws had been broken.

"From the Ministry of Environment's perspective — It appears there are several possible violations of environmental legislation that may have occurred related to this event," Dahl wrote. He also expressed concern the federal Fisheries Act may have been broken.

Meanwhile, as officials assessed the damage done, some government staff were working to manage public reaction to the spill.

Premier Christy Clark's then deputy chief of staff Michele Cadario raised concerns other proposed mine developments could be slowed by the disaster.

"Was there anything that could have been done that wasn't to prevent this situation — are there better standards employed elsewhere that we should look at?" she asked in an email to a host of staffers, including communications people.

"We have a few new mines coming on stream and we don't want anything to get in the way of that," she wrote.

Cadario and other government staffers raised the need to communicate with First Nations in the area and any impact on drinking water.

But they also made an effort to help mine owner Imperial Metals' public relations efforts after the spill.

The FOI documents show government staff were concerned the company had not been heard from hours after the spill. One email from John Paul Fraser, head of government communications, said the company silence was “looking bad.”

Cadario offered a solution.

“I know the owner of Imperial Metals — I’ll text him and see if he can stir someone up,” Cadario wrote.

The company’s owner, Murray Edwards, has donated (<https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2017/05/08/Clark-Club-Big-Donors-Rainmakers/>) more than \$400,000 to the BC Liberal Party since 2005 through Imperial Metals and his oil sands company. Edwards also hosted a private fundraiser in Alberta that raised (<http://www.vancouver.sun.com/news/Major+Imperial+Metals+shareholder+held+private+fundraiser+Clark+election/10102715/story.html>) \$1 million for the party’s 2013 election campaign.

After speaking to Edwards, Cadario wanted to ensure the company’s statement was being noticed by the public.

“I spoke to the owner Murray Edwards and he said an NR [new release] has gone out — Twitter traffic seems to still say that they haven’t heard from IM — Has that now been rectified?”

In another brief email Clark’s then director of communications Ben Chin said he had spoken to “Jas” about impending TV news coverage of the spill. The reference, following earlier emails on Global TV’s coverage, appears to refer to Jas Johal, then a Global reporter.

“Just finished talking to Jas... it’s just a heads up, not an interview request. He tells me the pictures at 6 will be very graphic. Imperial should get out in front,” Chin wrote.

Johal left journalism weeks later to work in communications for the BC LNG alliance. He was elected as a Liberal MLA for Richmond-Queensborough in May’s provincial election.

The dam containing the tailings pond at the Mount Polley copper and gold mine failed (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2017/03/31/Who-Pays-for-Mount-Polley-Spill/>) on Aug. 4, 2014, sending more than 25 million cubic metres of waste water into nearby Quesnel Lake and surrounding streams. The mine is about 60 kilometres northeast of Williams Lake.

Investigators concluded (<https://www.mountpolleyreviewpanel.ca/mount-polley-review-panel-delivers-final-report>) the failure was the result of a design flaw.

Cleaning up the disaster cost (<https://www.desmog.ca/2017/03/28/british-columbians-saddled-40-million-clean-bill-imperial-metals-escapes-criminal-charges>) the province \$40 million.

A private prosecution of Imperial Metals and the B.C. government by MiningWatch was blocked (<https://miningwatch.ca/blog/2017/3/28/fisheries-act-charges-over-canadas-biggest-mining-spill-stayed-court-pressure-mounts#sthash.Vv2Fd6Vq.dpbs>) in March by the federal government, which cited ongoing investigations. 🐾