

Commentary: Clear plan, funding needed for transboundary waterways

Tulsequah Chief mine pollution of Taku watershed has to stop

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Commentary By Chris Zimmer

For The Cordova Times

The Taku River is a vital Southeast Alaska resource. The Taku River is usually Southeast Alaska's largest overall salmon producer, with Southeast's largest run of coho and king salmon. On average, 40 percent of the region's king salmon originate in the Taku River. Alaska has managed its portion of the Taku well. But, since it is a transboundary river with much of its spawning habitat on the British Columbia side, we are also dependent on B.C. to properly care for its side of the river.

The 61-year saga of the Tulsequah Chief mine polluting the Taku Watershed with toxic acid mine drainage (AMD) shows B.C. is failing in its responsibilities. This pollution is in violation of B.C. and Canadian laws and mine permits. A recent study done by B.C. found "unacceptable risks" from the toxic drainage. Three years ago, the B.C. Mines Minister visited Juneau and promised to remedy the problem, yet nothing has been done.

For years, B.C. has been telling us that the mine needs to be purchased and re-opened in order for the mine site to be cleaned up. However, two companies have gone bankrupt attempting to do exactly that. Redfern Resources bought the mine in the 1990s. B.C. failed to enforce several of their own cleanup orders and the company was unable to re-open the mine and went bankrupt in 2009. Chieftain Metals bought the mine in 2010, installed a treatment plant that only ran for a few months and was closed in 2012. Again, cleanup orders went largely unenforced and B.C. took no additional actions against the company to remedy the situation. Chieftain went bankrupt in 2016 and abandoned the mine site. The toxic AMD flow continues to this day.

B.C. claims the current bankruptcy proceedings make it impossible to take any action to clean up the mine site. This seems to be another excuse to do nothing. B.C. should be aggressively petitioning the bankruptcy court for permission to institute cleanup actions. B.C. needs to provide a specific cleanup plan, with deadlines and funding. Chieftain's main creditor recently submitted a cleanup plan to the B.C. government, but B.C. has refused to provide a copy to Alaska agencies.

Any threat to this productive river must be aggressively responded to by Alaska, its congressional delegation and the U.S. federal government. These leaders have increased pressure on B.C. and Canada over the past several years. We have B.C.'s attention, but more pressure is needed to compel mine cleanup.

In a February 2017 letter to Sen. Dennis Egan, D-Juneau, Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott wrote, "During two recent meetings of the SOC Bilateral Workgroup, we were reassured of B.C.'s efforts to identify and address any outstanding legacy concerns relating to the Tulsequah Chief mine." But, as six Alaska legislators wrote to Walker 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."

After the lieutenant governor and U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan's visit to Ottawa this past February, Sullivan told the CBC that Canada "... needs to act and act very soon. ... If it goes too much longer without forward movement, I think we have legitimate reason to be fairly aggressive in our continuing conversations with the Canadians."

I respectfully suggest it is now time to get more aggressive. Any reasonable deadline for action has passed.

In a July 2018 letter to Canada's Minister of the Environment, Sullivan and Mallott wrote:

"All diligence needs to be taken to reclaim the Tulsequah Chief Mine site. While British Columbia continues to march through the process of cleaning up the site, we hope that you can continue to lend your aid in coordinating and facilitating B.C.'s efforts."

B.C. is not "marching," they're standing still and using bankruptcy as an excuse.

Cleaning up the Tulsequah Chief mine is a necessary first step in building any sort of trust that Alaskans will have in B.C. and Canada's mining and environmental laws. Prior to the bankruptcies, B.C. had plenty of chances to enforce the laws and cleanup orders against Redfern and Chieftain Metals. Yet, they failed because they were more interested in mine development at any cost than enforcing laws and permits.

Alaska must be uncompromising in demanding that B.C. must now specifically assume responsibility for cleanup and develop a clear plan and obtaining funding and to stop making excuses for why they can't do that.

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