

# Alaska Dispatch News

## **Laine Welch: Southeast groups push for protection from Canadian mines upriver**

Laine Welch  
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Throughout history, arguments over land and water usages have run the gamut from tussles over fences with next-door neighbors to shootouts over interstate grazing rights in the old west. But when land and water rights pit one country against another, that's when things really get tricky.

That is the situation in Southeast Alaska, where residents find themselves downstream from several massive open pit gold and copper mines being developed in bordering British Columbia. The mines are located in the headwaters of some of Southeast's largest and most productive wild salmon rivers: the Taku, Stikine, and Unuk.

Canada operates under different permitting and environmental rules than the U.S. and currently, no safeguards are in place to protect Alaska waters and fisheries from chemical and heavy-metal contaminants leaching from the B.C. mines. Recall the Aug. 4 [tailings dam breach at the Mt. Polley mine](#), and it's easy to understand why Southeast residents are seeing red.

"Right now the U.S. and certainly Alaska have no say in how these watersheds we share with Canada are developed," said Heather Hardcastle, Trans-boundary Rivers Campaign director for Trout Unlimited and co-owner of Taku River Reds in Juneau. That is unacceptable to the people of the Panhandle, who are being urged to respond with the power of their pens. Meetings are scheduled this week in Juneau, Sitka, Petersburg, Ketchikan and Wrangell to inform people about the threats being posed by the big mines upriver and to give them a way to take action, primarily by writing letters to the congressional delegation and the State Department as well as urging lawmakers, municipalities, advisory committees, boards and commissions and businesses to send similar letters.

"What we are asking is for the U.S. State Department to engage with Canada on this matter and activate the Boundary Waters Treaty," said Hardcastle, who has teamed with Salmon Beyond Borders and the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Working Group in the grassroots outreach efforts.

An International Joint Commission was created by the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 to prevent and resolve transboundary water disputes between Canada and the U.S.

"We feel that the best mechanism by which we can have a say in the Taku, Stine and Unuk watersheds is to have the IJC activated and review these watersheds and the development that Canada is proposing and constructing even as we speak," Hardcastle added.

Both the U.S. and Canadian governments must “refer an issue” to activate the joint commission.

“The first step is convincing the U.S. State Department that they should look at this matter,” Hardcastle said, “and then to continue building ties across the border to similarly urge Canadians to push for the same thing.”

Alaska’s congressional delegation has come out strongly in support of the IJC oversight. Is Canada receptive? The short answer, she said, is no.

“When it comes to the Canadian federal government and the B.C. provincial government, their agenda is mineral development,” Hardcastle said. “They have not reached out to Alaskans in any meaningful way.”

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