

Alaska Dispatch News

Business

British Columbia's loose mining enforcement worrisome for Southeast Alaska



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A [damning report](#) out of British Columbia has found regulations for the mining industry there are generally ineffective, leading to increased risks for the environment, and that's bad news for some in Southeast Alaska who worry that contaminated water flowing from Canadian rivers across the border could hurt Panhandle communities. The report, issued by the auditor general of the province of British Columbia, is the result of an investigation that found, among other things, that "monitoring and inspections of mines were inadequate to ensure mine operators complied with requirements" for regulation. Too few resources, infrequent inspections and lack of enforcement in mining industry oversight were common problems, the audit found.

It zeroed in on the Ministry of Energy and Mines and the Ministry of Environment in British Columbia.

There are 13 major coal and metal mines operating in British Columbia right now, and several more are in the permitting process.

Guy Archibald, mining and clean water coordinator at the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, said the report reinforces problems that Southeast Alaska has dealt with for a long time.

“The report points out once again that we have absolutely no confidence in British Columbia being either willing or able to protect the interests of Alaska in developing these mines,” Archibald said. “This report validates our worst fears.”

An embodiment of those fears also surfaced in 2014 when a dam failure at Mount Polley, a gold and copper mine in British Columbia, released approximately 25 million cubic meters of wastewater and tailings into nearby water systems and lakes. (The auditor was already working on the report when that happened.) It may be years, the audit said, until the environmental, financial and social impacts of that failure are completely known.

In 2014, officials in Canada moved ahead with plans for a new mine [despite calls from Southeast Alaskans](#) for a stricter assessment of its impact on the environment.

Many fishermen, tribal entities and environmental groups worry about the acid mine drainage that results in water contamination, and how that might threaten local species of fish, Archibald said.

The issue is getting attention nationally. Alaska’s congressional delegation [sent a letter last week](#) to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, expressing concerns about “the development of several hardrock mines in British Columbia and their potential effects on water quality in the transboundary rivers that flow from Canada into Southeast Alaska.” That letter, signed by U.S. Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan and Rep. Don Young, cited a lack of confidence that Canadian mining is carried out safely, with particular concerns over commercial and recreational fishing, tourism and water-quality maintenance of transboundary rivers.

“Like most Alaskans, we strongly support responsible mining, including mines in Southeast Alaska, but Alaskans need to have every confidence that mining activity in Canada is carried out just as safely as it is in our state,” they wrote. “Yet, today, that confidence does not exist.”

Specifically, they called out proposed mining in the Stikine, Taku River and Unuk watersheds.

Canadian acid mine waste has already been affecting Southeast Alaska for decades, said the letter, which also mentioned the auditor’s report.

Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott said in a statement earlier this month that the report “is troubling and a wakeup call to the B.C. government that important changes must occur,” and that his office will be reviewing it. British Columbia’s Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett [agreed with the core findings](#) of the report, according to CBC News in Canada.

The lawmakers who wrote to Kerry asked the State Department -- along with the Obama administration and Alaska - - to encourage British Columbia officials to consider the cumulative impacts of mining on transboundary waters during the review process for mines, formalize a consultation process with U.S. agencies, tribes and Alaska Native corporations during mine permit reviews and more.

“The decisions behind developing these mines in the whole region needs to be elevated to an international discussion,” said Archibald. “How can they safely operate and construct mines in these waters? We’re not saying there shouldn’t be any mines here. We’re just saying there should be a higher level of review, and an independent review.”