

# AK delegation: State Department failing to address transboundary mines

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JUNEAU EMPIRE

Efforts to enlist State Department help in protecting Southeast Alaska's watersheds from Canadian mining projects have fallen on deaf ears, according to a recent letter from Alaska's congressional delegation.

In a Sept. 8 letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the delegation reiterated its concerns over Canadian mining projects on the Taku, Stikine and Unuk river watersheds, which originate in Canada and flow into Southeast Alaska. The delegation is concerned that pollution from Canadian mining projects could hurt Southeast's salmon habitat and way of life.

"The stakes for Alaska are enormous," the delegation wrote. "These mines pose huge economic risk to Alaska in the form of acid mine drainage and toxic heavy metals that threaten Alaska Native communities ... as well as the regional \$2 billion-dollar-a-year fishing and tourism industries. ... To this point, we believe there has been a failure by your Department to support potential solutions embraced by Alaskans."

Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan and congressman Don Young signed the letter, at the heart of which is a request for the department to reconsider mediation with Canada through the International Joint Commission — a U.S.-Canadian cooperative group tasked with settling water disputes. This is the second time this year the delegation has requested State Department help with the department, so far declining to pursue IJC intervention.

Additionally, the delegation asked the State Department to push Canada for a "more formal" role for the U.S. in mine approval processes. The delegation also requested funds for water quality studies that would allow the U.S. to sue Canada for damages in the event that mines adversely affect Southeast's water quality and salmon habitat. According to a May 3 report by British Columbia's auditor general, major mines in the province are currently under insured by \$1.2 billion, money that would be used for pollution cleanup.

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In May, the delegation sent a similar letter to Secretary Kerry outlining steps the department could take to address concerns over transboundary mines. The department supported several of these requests in their response, but didn't promise any additional action above the State Department's semiannual discussions with Canada. Kerry has yet to respond to the delegation's Sept. 8 letter.

IJC intervention is the delegation's "big ask," and could take some time, according to Rob Sanderson, vice president for the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. Central Council participated in recent talks with the State Department on the issue, and Sanderson, who weighed in on the delegation's letter while making presentations on transboundary mine issues at a conservation summit, said he is personally worried the State Department may be working too slowly.

"We know time is short with this [president's] administration. I don't know what the delegation can do but keep pushing the envelop forward," Sanderson said. "Time is running out with this, and we don't know what the next administration will do."

Chris Zimmer, from the conservation group Salmon Beyond Borders, said that in lieu of an IJC intervention, which would not itself be a “silver bullet,” he’s glad to see the delegation do everything in its power.

“It’s good to see the delegation push back on the State Department. Now it’s up to Secretary Kerry to understand the importance of this issue and do something,” Zimmer said. Instead of waiting for the State Department to change its tune on IJC intervention, Zimmer said he’s happy the delegation didn’t just “twiddle their thumbs.”

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