

Alaska tribal groups push for study on B.C. mine safety



Contents from a tailings pond is pictured going down the Hazeltine Creek into Quesnel Lake near the town of Likely, B.C., Tuesday, Aug. 5, 2014. (Jonathan Hayward / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

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KETCHIKAN, Alaska -- A coalition of aboriginal tribes in southeast Alaska is calling for a Canada-U.S. commission to study the impacts of British Columbia's mining industry on shared waters because of last summer's collapse of a tailings-pond dam.

Some 14 tribes have formed the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group to urge both governments to evaluate B.C. mining-safety practices through the International Joint Commission.

The call follows the release of an independent report in late January that blamed an inadequately designed dam for the Aug. 4, 2014 incident that saw 24 million cubic metres of silt and water flow into nearby lakes and rivers at the Mount Polley open-pit, gold-and-copper mine near Williams Lake, B.C.

"Alaskans, we're not at all convinced that B.C. can do all this mining without harming us," said Carrie James, the group's co-chair. "Environmental safeguards in B.C., they've been weakened over the past decade."

The group's main concern is its \$1-billion fishery, located downstream from several large-scale mining projects, James said. They want an investigation into any potential long-term effects on the fish and other wildlife located along the transboundary rivers.

The group points to the B.C. government-ordered engineering report, released in late January, that cites an inadequately designed dam that didn't account for drainage and erosion failures associated with glacial till beneath the pond.

The group said the report calculates two breaches will occur every 10 years, if the same watered tailings facilities are used.

It's arguing for a moratorium on the development of large-scale mines along Alaska's southeast border with B.C.

The quiet opening of the Red Chris mine in the Stikine River watershed, only days after the report, was a "deep insult," said the group.

That mine is also operated by the Imperial Metals Corp. (TSX:III), the same company responsible for the Mount Polley mine.

"Canada is moving too quick, they're streamlining these permitting processes, there's too many mines opening up," James said.

"There's no assurance. I don't have any trust that these mines are going to be safe."

A spokesman for the Canadian section of the International Joint Commission, based in Ottawa, said the organization is aware of the mining issues in B.C.

Paul Allen said the body would only launch a review is given a formal mandate by both federal governments under the Boundary Waters Treaty.

Provincial and state governments would have to ask the national governments to act on their behalf.

Requests for comment were not returned by B.C.'s Ministry of Mines, nor the energy spokesman for Alaska's senator.

Shortly after the dam collapse, Senator Lisa Murkowski wrote the U.S. Secretary of State saying thousands of Alaska natives, commercial fishermen and members of the tourism industry have legitimate concerns about the potential impacts of large-scale mining in B.C.

"I therefore urge you to accelerate your work with your Canadian counterparts to confirm that new mining activities are subject to proper review and continued oversight," she wrote.

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