

Comment: Alaskans' distrust of B.C. is well-founded

When B.C. Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett visited southeast Alaska this summer, his aim was to calm critics of the province's aggressive push to build at least 10 mines close to the Alaska border

"I understand why people feel so strongly about protecting what they have," Bennett said at a Juneau news conference. "There's a way of life here that has tremendous value and the people here don't want to lose it. I get that."

What led to Bennett taking such a conciliatory tone? An unprecedented outpouring of concern from a powerful alliance of Alaskan politicians, tribes, fishing organizations and environmental groups perturbed by the modern-day gold rush alongside vital transboundary salmon rivers such as the Unuk, Taku and Stikine.

Indeed, long-held perceptions of Canada as a country with strict environmental standards and B.C. as a province that values natural beauty have taken a near-fatal beating in southeast Alaska, where many now regard Canadians as bad neighbours unilaterally making decisions that could threaten the region's two major economic drivers — tourism and fishing.

Alaskans emphasize they are not against resource extraction, provided there are adequate environmental and financial safeguards, but believe Canada's record — most recently illustrated by the Mount Polley mine tailings-dam collapse — shows that B.C.'s regulations are not strong enough to protect downstream communities.

It's little wonder Alaskans have difficulty trusting B.C. when it's known that in the years leading up to the Mount Polley incident, the provincial government permitted substantial increases in mining, beyond the design capacity of the tailings facility. Furthermore, in 2010, the government was told about cracks across the front of the retaining wall.

Yet when Alaskans asked for a panel review of Seabridge gold's KSM mine, there was no response from B.C. and the mine was approved. That project will have a massive 239-metre-high earth dam to hold back toxic tailings.

Subsequently, the Red Chris mine, close to the Stikine River and owned by Imperial Metals — the same company that owns the Mount Polley mine — was given the go-ahead with a tailings dam similar to Mount Polley's, despite a recommendation from a government panel to stop using such dams.

When I started writing a 10-part series on these transboundary tensions for online news magazine DeSmog Canada, I expected to be chronicling differences between environmental regulations in Canada and the U.S., but I didn't expect to stumble upon a vast difference in the treatment of media requests.

Over the past four months, I've submitted four requests for interviews on the topic with Bennett. Not a single request was granted. Instead, I was provided with prepared statements to be attributed to a ministry "spokesperson."

Reporters in B.C. are so commonly left trying to untangle this kind of government mumbo-jumbo that we've almost stopped complaining about it — which is what made the response I received from Alaskan officials all the more refreshing.

Phone calls to the Alaska government were met with the offer of an interview with Lt.-Gov. Byron Mallott, who is in charge of the transboundary mining file. The face-to-face interview was chatty and unscripted, giving useful insights into how the problem was viewed by the state and the probable direction of the Alaskan government.

A cold call to Alaska Department of Natural Resources was immediately transferred to a senior manager, who answered all questions, including those on finances, and, unlike B.C. civil servants, could be named in the story.

B.C.'s response to media requests is perplexing, given the increased importance of resource projects obtaining social licence.

Bennett initially visited Alaska in November and provoked outrage by meeting only with the Alaska Miners Association.

His return visit was an effort to placate critics by suggesting an agreement between B.C. and Alaska to give Alaskans more say in the mine-approval process. But many remain unconvinced, and there is a continued push for a referral to the International Joint Commission and for up-front bonds to cover compensation if Alaskan interests are harmed.

University of B.C. mining professor Marcello Veiga says if mining companies are serious about avoiding conflict, they must establish a relationship with surrounding communities and then build sufficient trust to reassure neighbours they are not at risk.

If trust is the key to satisfying community concerns about mining projects, providing timely, accurate information and ministerial access would be a good place to start.

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- See more at: <http://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/op-ed/comment-alaskans-distrust-of-b-c-is-well-founded-1.2072495#sthash.2vT85qVV.dpuf>