

Alaskans Leery Of Bad Neighbours Amid B.C. Gold Rush

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Long-held perceptions of Canada as a country with strict environmental standards and B.C. as a province that values natural beauty are taking a near-fatal beating in Southeast Alaska, where many now regard Canadians as bad neighbours who are unilaterally making decisions that could threaten the region's two major economic drivers.

Fishing and tourism -- each billion-dollar industries -- are the lifeblood of Southeast Alaska, where glaciers sweep down into rivers home to five species of wild salmon and massive snow-covered peaks tower over fertile wetlands.

Tourism accounts for 10,900 jobs in the Alaska Panhandle and salmon fishing employs 7,300 people.

Air and water are the only ways into communities such as Juneau, the state capital, and almost seven million hectares, or three-quarters of Southeast Alaska, are within the Tongass National Forest, where industrial activity is limited.

But, upstream, in northwest B.C., there is a new-style gold rush with an unprecedented number of applications for open-pit gold and copper mines, some made viable by construction of the Northwest Transmission Line and all requiring road access.

Alaskan politicians, tribes, fishing organizations and environmental groups have come together in a rare show of unity to condemn B.C.'s push to approve mines close to major transboundary salmon rivers, such as the Stikine, Taku and Unuk, which run from B.C. into Alaska. Tensions are running so high the groups are asking the [International Joint Commission](#), designed to resolve Canada/U.S. water problems, to step in.

Canada is increasingly viewed as a "bad actor," whose record -- most recently illustrated by the [Mount Polley mine tailings dam collapse](#) -- shows that the province's environmental regulations and oversight is not strong enough to protect downstream communities.

"It's the new wild west," said Heather Hardcastle, a commercial fisherman and co-ordinator of [Salmon Beyond Borders](#), pointing out that, even though Alaska has nothing to gain and everything to lose, Alaskans are being denied meaningful input into mine decisions.

10 Advanced Mining Projects in Northwestern B.C.

The new mines include Imperial Metals' Red Chris, a copper and gold mine operated by the same company that owns Mount Polley, and Seabridge Gold's massive KSM (Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell) mine, 30 kilometres from the U.S border and Misty Fjords National Monument, which will open up mining of the largest undeveloped gold reserve in the world. KSM has provincial and federal environmental assessment approval and is waiting for permits.

According to B.C.'s Ministry of Energy and Mines there are 10 advanced projects in the northwest corner of B.C. and numerous others in exploration phases.

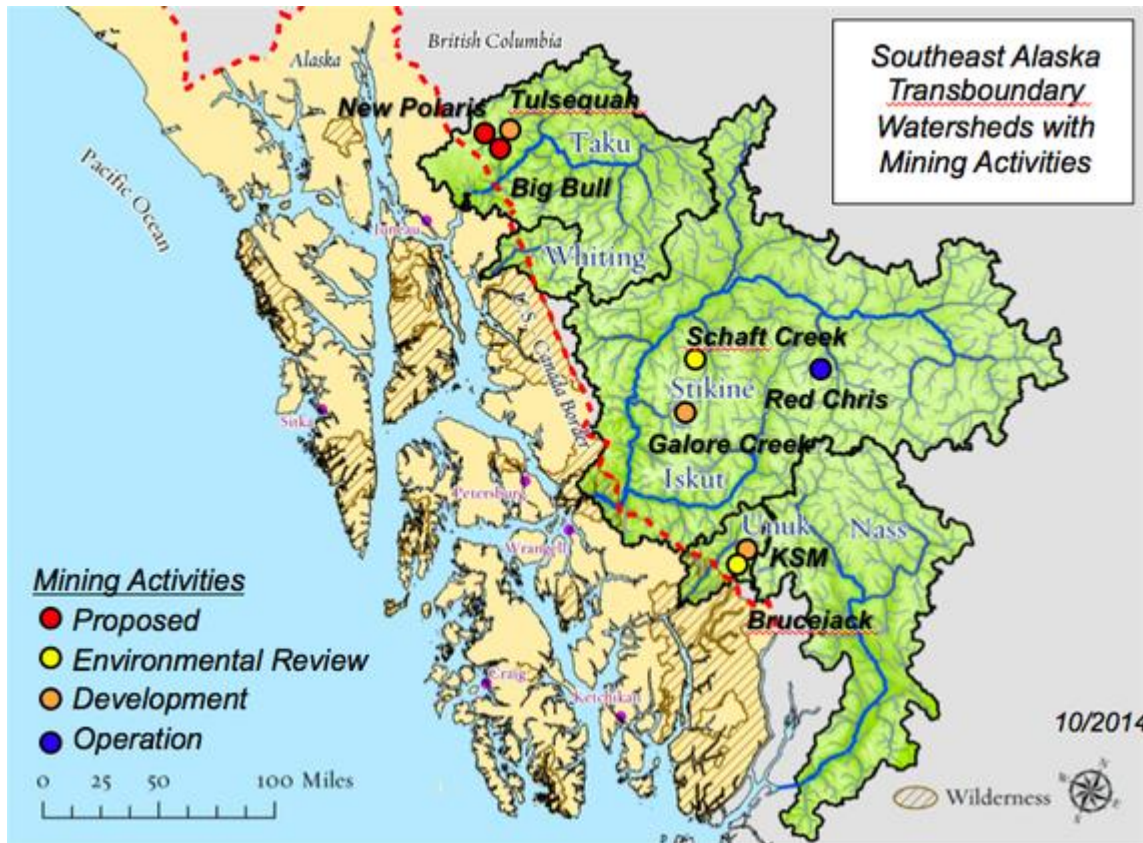


Image: *Salmon Beyond Borders*

They include Kitsault (under construction), Silvertip (provincial permit granted in June), Tulsequah Chief (construction started, but project delayed), Brucejack (Mines Act permit application under review), Kutcho and Schaft Creek (both in the environmental assessment pre-application stage).

In comparison, there are only five operating mines in Alaska, of which two are in Southeast Alaska and one of which uses dry stack tailings, the method of dealing with acid-generating mine waste favoured by the expert panel that investigated the Mount Polley dam collapse.

The [Canadian system](#) appears to aim "to get to yes fast," without consideration of other values when it comes to resource extraction, said Jev Shelton, a commercial fisherman and former member of the [Pacific Salmon Commission](#), the joint Canadian/U.S. regulatory body designed to protect salmon stocks.

"It is certainly triggering a fair bit of anger," Shelton said.

B.C. Moving 'Full Speed Ahead'

The pace and scale of development is huge, said Chris Zimmer of [Rivers Without Borders](#).

"B.C. is going full speed ahead without any brakes. It looks as if they're trying to move as fast as they can before Alaska puts up hurdles."

There is growing indignation that B.C. is not listening to Alaskan concerns and that additional input, promised in May after [Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett](#) met with [Alaska's Lieutenant Governor Byron Mallott](#), amounts to little more than window-dressing.

"We were a bit stunned by Bill Bennett giving us the table scraps and saying Alaska can come in at the final stages of permitting -- they're saying we will involve you when the final decision has been made to build the mine," Zimmer said.

Alaskan Concerns Ignored

Gillnetter and fisheries consultant Lindsey Bloom agrees that Alaskan questions are being ignored.

"Since I started working on this issue, the disregard of Canadian officials towards us is concerning," she said.

While Mallott and Bennett were meeting in B.C., a group of Alaskan tribal leaders, fishing industry representatives and environmental advocates met with high-level provincial government staff.

However, it was an exercise in frustration because of the lack of answers or acknowledgement of downstream concerns, according to several people who attended the meeting.

"We tried to explain we don't want more say in the permitting process, we want something to put us on an equal footing with B.C.," Hardcastle said.

B.C. government staff appeared to think their task was to explain the process instead of listening to concerns and suggestions, said several members of the Alaskan delegation.

Mallott, who is leading an Alaskan transboundary waters working group, said in an interview with DeSmog Canada, that, during their meeting, Bennett was amenable to the notion of more Alaskan involvement and he has been invited to Alaska to continue the conversation.

Staff who have looked at B.C.'s technical permitting and assessment of mines believe the rules in B.C. and Alaska are generally equivalent, said Mallott.

"But there are significant differences. Whether the entire range of environmental assessment and permitting is robust enough to protect both B.C. and U.S. and Alaskan interests is still something we all need to be made more comfortable with," he said.

"We would want Alaskan officials at the table when decisions are made in such areas of permitting that it is possible that catastrophic events could take place."

- *Judith Lavoie, DeSmog Canada*