

Friday, July 10, 2015

Alaskans to British Columbia: Your Downstream Neighbors Are Watching

JUNEAU, ALASKA.— Southeast Alaskans expressed concern today for the future of their most important salmon rivers after authorities in British Columbia (B.C.) announced the re-opening of Mount Polley mine without having made recommended engineering, operational and safety changes.



Less than a year ago Mount Polley's tailings dam in southcentral B.C. collapsed, releasing 6.6 billion gallons of toxic waste including arsenic, lead, and nickel into salmon-producing lakes and streams of the Fraser River watershed.



Alaska Natives, commercial fishing interests, business owners, community leaders and others are deeply concerned that the same "develop at all costs" approach is being applied to mining in transboundary watersheds in northern B.C., including the Taku, Stikine and Unuk rivers that flow into Alaska.

"The British Columbia and Canadian governments seem to be glossing over the Mt. Polley disaster by ignoring the [recommendations](#) of mining experts who studied the dam failure and warned that the province should stop allowing the same risky tailings dam technology," said Heather Hardcastle, a commercial fisherman from Juneau. Hardcastle is co-owner of Taku River Reds and also works with [Salmon Beyond Borders](#).

Adding to Alaska's concerns, Mount Polley's owner, Imperial Metals, recently opened the Red Chris mine in the headwaters of the Stikine River. Red Chris, which launched operations with little fanfare and no advanced notice to Alaskans, is bigger than Mount Polley, has greater potential to unleash acid mine drainage, and is subject to the same failed standards of design and oversight in place when Mount Polly's dam collapsed.

At risk from Red Chris is the Stikine River that flows through the coast range and into Southeast Alaska at the community of Wrangell. The Stikine is one of Alaska's most productive salmon systems and its flats are the location of a highly productive and lucrative Dungeness crab fishery.

"Salmon Beyond Borders stands with the many individuals and communities whose livelihoods and reliance on clean water and salmon were disrupted by the Mount Polley disaster. We are working to prevent a similar catastrophe from tainting our waters and damaging fisheries in Alaska. We feel strongly that rather than allowing this risky mine to restart, British Columbia should apply lessons learned from Canada's worst mine disaster and cease permitting mines with watered tailings dams," said Hardcastle.

A number of B.C. mines that could harm Southeast Alaska's billion-dollar seafood and visitor industries as well as the customary and traditional activities by Alaskan tribes are moving forward or have recently opened. B.C.'s rapid and aggressive mine developments have prompted a wave of concern from a wide variety of Alaskans, including the state's congressional delegation, Southeast legislators, fishing organizations, and major cities including Juneau, Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, and Sitka.

Others that have spoken out include the National Congress of American Indian and the Alaska Federation of Natives. Southeast Alaska is home to many Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian citizens who continue to rely on the clean water and wild salmon of transboundary rivers as they have for tens of thousands of years

"There's nothing that convinces me Mount Polley is safe or that any mine with the same type of faulty, outdated tailings technology should be permitted; they are accidents waiting to happen. The Mount Polley review panel called them 'loaded guns' and stated in their report that B.C. is likely to suffer two tailings dam failures every 10 years. Alaska is now downstream from several of these mines and the risk of toxic pollution reaching our rivers is unacceptable for Alaskan and Canadian citizens who rely on clean water and healthy fish, and wildlife," said Dale Kelley, executive director of the Alaska Trollers Association, which represents Alaska's largest salmon fleet.

"Canada must be called upon to honor its obligations under the [Waters Boundary Treaty](#) to safeguard Alaska's water, fisheries, culture and jobs. We urge the State of Alaska to press the U.S. State Department to enforce this treaty," said Kelley.

A broad array of Alaskan interests including Senator Lisa Murkowski, have called on U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to enforce the treaty by activating the International Joint Commission, a bilateral body of Canadian and U.S. commissioners who review and attempt to resolve transboundary water disputes.

"It's clear that B.C. oversight of mines is weak and Alaska waters are at risk. It's time for leadership from both the State of Alaska and the Obama Administration," said Juneau fly fishing guide Matt Boline. "Actions speak louder than words and so far British Columbia and Canada have been all talk with their promises to be good neighbors protective of Alaska downstream interests. We need something more and we need it now."

Salmon Beyond Borders is a growing community of sport and commercial fishermen, community leaders, tribal citizens, First Nations, tourism and recreation business owners and concerned citizens united across the Alaska/British Columbia border to defend our salmon rivers from some of the world's largest proposed mines. www.salmonbeyondborders.org

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