



Lt. Governor outlines state stake in British Columbia issues

May 11, 2015

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Associated Press

JUNEAU — Alaska has clear interests in protecting with extreme vigilance the water quality in rivers that flow into the state that could be affected by mine projects across the border in Canada, Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott said Monday.

Mallott, who leads a working group for Gov. Bill Walker's administration focused on trans-boundary waters, spoke with reporters by phone about a fact-finding and relationship-building trip to British Columbia last week. Mallott said the trip included the start of discussions looking at ways to strengthen the state's involvement with environmental reviews and the permitting of mines in order to protect Alaska's interests.

Mallott said he invited the province's minister of energy and mines, Bill Bennett, to visit Alaska. In an interview with The Associated Press, Bennett said he would like to take Mallott up on his offer, perhaps this summer.

Concerns have been raised by conservationists, tribal groups and others about the potential effects of mine development in British Columbia on waters that flow into southeast Alaska, including possible effects on salmon. While the state has been involved in an environmental assessment working group, the coalition Salmon Beyond Borders says that doesn't go far enough.

The coalition has called for the involvement of a U.S.-Canada organization established to prevent and resolve trans-boundary water disputes to review the cumulative potential impact of development in the region and provide recommendations.

During the trip, Mallott said he also flew over the Mount Polley mine site, where a tailings pond failed last year. He also met with mine officials.

Having spent time with Mallott, Bennett said he feels a “very real potential” for British Columbia and Alaska to figure out how they can have a successful relationship in terms of trans-boundary water issues.

The province agrees with the state on a need for baseline water testing, he said, adding that some such testing has already been done. Baseline testing could help show if water quality changes over time.

Bennett said he believes the state has had good input into the environmental review process, but British Columbia will work with the state if improvements are needed. Bennett said he would propose giving the state of Alaska a greater opportunity to be involved with permitting than it had in the past, specifically the process in which provincial ministries work to ensure environmental conditions are met in the construction of a project.

“We know that we cannot allow a mine to be built and to operate in northwestern British Columbia that is going to contaminate the water flowing into Alaska. We know that, we accept that as our responsibility and we completely understand why those who live and work downstream have every right to be heard and to be concerned,” he said. “Totally respect that.”

Bennett said the government is doing its best to work issues out with Alaska, “and I think we’re on the right track.”