

B.C. mines concern some, not all, candidates

by [Ed Schoenfeld, CoastAlaska News](#)
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Canadian mines that could pollute Alaska waters are a big concern in Southeast these days. That begs the question: Where do those running for House and Senate stand on the issue?



British Columbia mines are slated to be built close to transboundary rivers. That worries some candidates for the Legislature.

The region's 10 candidates for the Legislature all say they want to make sure mines don't spill dangerous chemicals or minerals into rivers where fish hatch and spawn.

But they differ in how they phrase their concerns, and whether they first bring up environmental issues or the need for resource development.

Kreiss-Tomkins vs. Samuelson

Take, for example, House District 35, which includes Sitka, Petersburg and many Southeast villages. There, Democrat Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins is running for re-election.

“You’ve got to defend habitat and protect habitat, which sustains rural economies and salmon and fishing. In Southeast Alaska, that is especially true. The KSM mine is a hugely concerning threat to that, just as the Pebble Mine is to Southwest Alaska, which I also feel is not the right mine in the right place,” he says.

KSM is the Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell Project under development northeast of Ketchikan. It’s the most recent focus of transboundary mine critics.

Kreiss-Tomkins’ opponent, Petersburg Republican Steven Samuelson, takes a different approach.

“The biggest thing with me is that we’re here for the resources. We’re in Alaska because of the logging, because of the mining, because of the fishing, because of all the different resources that are here. If we’re not taking advantage of these things in a sustainable, well-worked way, then what are we going to do?” he says.

Concerns focus on the safety of tailings dams, which hold back water, pollutants and minerals leftover from processing ore.

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McGuan vs. Muñoz

Some cite a recent eastern British Columbia mine dam break, which released millions of gallons of silty water.

That’s an issue for Democrat George McGuan, who’s trying to unseat incumbent Republican Cathy Muñoz for Juneau’s House District 34.

“Anyone who saw the video of the Mount Polley disaster had to take a second and just think, ‘What were we doing as the human race. ‘How is it that we let something like this happen’,” she says.

Muñoz says she shares such concerns.

But she’s also confident the most controversial mine – the KSM – takes Alaska’s interests into account.

“There’s a willingness by the B.C. government and the developers of the KSM project, as an example, to work with the state of Alaska. That’s a good thing. That’s a very positive thing and something that I very much want to see happen and continue to support happening.

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Egan vs. Williams

Republican Tom Williams, challenging Democratic incumbent Dennis Egan in Juneau's Senate District Q, takes it a step further.

"KSM, when they were looking at opening up that mine, they realized there were going to be some issues that affected Alaska. And they came to the state DNR very early on, right up front. And, at the meeting, there was a representative from DNR there, and he actually applauded what KSM had done," he says.

DNR is the Department of Natural Resources. The meeting was a KSM presentation to the Alaska Miners Association.

But talks and negotiations don't always work. Egan cites the long-closed Tulsequah Chief Mine, which Chieftain Metals tried to reopen near another transboundary river.

"We formed a Taku River user's group to try to get answers. And we had promises from the mine, from Chieftain, that they were going to do all of these great things and work with the state and federal agencies. None of that happened. None of it happened. They were blowing smoke," he says.

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Klein vs. Ortiz

The formal approach to addressing Alaska's concerns is through the federal government.

Canada and the U.S. have a system for addressing cross-border issues and most candidates bring that up as one way to have some influence.

One is Ketchikan Independent Dan Ortiz, who's running in House District 36. It also includes Wrangell, Metlakatla, Hydaburg, Hyder and Myers Chuck.

"I fully support the legislative delegation's attempts to work with the State Department and to try to encourage the Canadian officials and British Columbia officials to do a good, broad-based review of the particular project at the KSM mine, as well as some of those other mines that potentially could threaten our resources," he says.

Ortiz is running against Ketchikan Republican Chere Klein. She's less worried about the mines.

"Overall, when you look at how many mines are operating in B.C. and have operated here, it's pretty rare that there have been have issues. But everything that we do, we have to look at the consequences to industries it could affect," she says.

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Dukowitz vs. Kito

Transboundary mining is also on the agenda of Juneau incumbent Democrat Sam Kito. He's seeking to retain his House District 33 seat, which includes parts of his hometown, Haines, Skagway and nearby cities.

He wants a closer relationship with mine project owners.

"They have kept us informed, or they have kept the state informed, different mining companies as they move forward. But I think there might be a role for a more formal arrangement between the state of Alaska and some of these permitting authorities to make sure we protect water quality and habitat," he says.

Juneau Republican Peter Dukowitz is challenging Kito.

He wants more resource development. But he says it needs strong community support.

"We have to reasonably develop this state. We do need the jobs, we do need the income, but not at the cost of the environment. A mining project is a very big concern of mine.

Southeast has another legislative seat, representing Senate District R. It includes Sitka and Petersburg and much of Prince of Wales Island. That's held by Sitka Republican Bert Stedman, who's not up for election this year.

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