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B.C. First Nations mining council report raises tailings dam safety concerns

Nearly three dozen mine-waste storage facilities could affect 33 First Nation communities

By Gordon Hoekstra, Vancouver Sun June 3, 2015

A report that shows a widespread fallout zone for mine-waste storage facilities in northern and central B.C. has led to a call for more protection of watersheds, assurance that communities receive long-term benefits, and creation of a cleanup fund.

The survey being released today was commissioned by the B.C. First Nations Energy and Mining Council in the wake of Imperial Metals' Mount Polley mine-waste dam failure last year.

The breach released millions of cubic metres of finely ground rock containing potentially toxic metals, called tailings, into the Quesnel Lake watershed, resulting in heightened concerns over dam safety and the long-term effects on aquatic life.

The new report — Uncertainty Upstream: Potential Threats from Tailings Facility Failures in Northern British Columbia — found 35 mine-waste storage facilities at 26 active and closed mine could affect 33 First Nations communities if there is a breach.

Another 200 communities are also in areas that could be affected by a breach, including major centres such as Prince George, Smithers and Terrace, said the report.

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Computer-generated geographic data shows a total of 3,275 kilometres of waterways are immediately downstream of the 35 mine-waste storage facilities, and 5,403 km lie in watersheds further downstream where the contaminants could eventually reach.

The mining council said pollution could affect water quality and be devastating to salmon and steelhead, which the report notes are acutely sensitive to copper that is common in acid-rock drainage from mine waste.

The report found that 80 per cent of Chinook salmon habitat in the region (12,813 km) is either downstream of a tailings facility or requires migrating through a potential contaminant flow path. For Sockeye, Coho and Chum the numbers are 79 per cent, 58 per cent and 47 per cent, respectively.

Cautioning that the analysis is not intended to imply that all the mine waste facilities will fail at some point, nevertheless, the council said the summary of potential threats is a new tool that should inform future planning of mining operations.

“I think this is a wake-up call for us, and this particular piece of work helps us to start to think about how do we plan, how do we respond if such a disaster occurs elsewhere in the province,” B.C. First Nations Energy and Mining Council CEO Dave Porter said in an interview.

The council called for protected areas that encompass watersheds and waterways to ensure rivers remain intact, and that communities receive long-term economic benefits where mines do proceed.

The council — established by the First Nations Summit, the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs and the B.C. Assembly of First Nations — also called for a way to fund cleanup and remediation if there is another breach.

The B.C. government has said it is the responsibility of the polluters to pay for cleanup. Imperial Metals has said they are spending \$67 million on remediation of the Mount Polley gold and copper mine spill.

But Porter suggested there is no way to require cleanup and a “super fund” of hundreds of millions of dollars paid into by all mines would be a better idea.

Porter said he was particularly concerned by the findings of an expert panel that investigated the Mount Polley dam failure.

The panel said that on average there will be two failures every 10 years in British Columbia if the inventory of active tailings dams in the province remains unchanged, and performance in the future reflects that in the past.

One of the key recommendations of the expert panel was that the B.C. mining industry move away from the traditional method of storing mine waste behind earth-and-rock dams under water.

Instead, waste should be stored in old pits and mine shafts and also be dry stacked above ground.

However, an examination by The Vancouver Sun, published in April, found companies in B.C. with proposals for 10 large, open-pit metal mines have no plans, at least for now, to follow the panel’s recommendation to move away from the traditional method.

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