

B.C. mines minister talks transboundary mines, Tulsequah Chief cleanup

Mines minister, Mallott discuss transboundary mines

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Michael Penn | Juneau Empire -

Bill Bennett, British Columbia's Minister of Energy and Mines, left, speaks to reporters with Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott during his first day in Alaska at the Walter Soboleff Center on Monday. Bennett is to hear from Alaskan businesses, tribes, municipalities, legislators, and environmental groups, and see first-hand the Taku River from the Tulsequah mine to the salmon fishery process on the Alaskan side of the border and meet with Alaska state officials on transboundary water issues.

By [MARY CATHARINE MARTIN](#)

JUNEAU EMPIRE

British Columbia Minister of Energy and Mines William “Bill” Bennett, who is on a four-day trip to Southeast Alaska, said after visiting the Tulsequah Chief Mine on Monday that the pollution the defunct mine has been draining into the Taku River watershed for decades should be fixed.

Bennett and several other British Columbian representatives are in Southeast Alaska Sunday through Thursday, meeting with tribes, stakeholders, government officials, environmental groups, elected officials and fishermen, as well as touring the Taku River, going to see Greens Creek Mine and other activities. Monday, Bennett and Lieutenant Governor Byron Mallott visited the Tulsequah Chief mine.

The Tulsequah Chief has been leaching acid mine drainage into the Tulsequah River since it closed in 1957, and Alaska has been asking British Columbia to clean up the mine site for years. British Columbia and Environment Canada have also been trying to get the companies that own it (they've changed over the years) to clean it up. Chieftain Metals Corp. is the current owner.

Tulsequah Chief drainage "is not something that I'm proud of, as a British Columbian," Bennett said. "It's something that needs to be addressed."

A December 2014 report found that the drainage poses a low risk to fish in the Tulsequah River and is not affecting fish in the Taku River, into which the Tulsequah flows. Bennett mentioned those findings, but added that "it (the drainage) is still something that needs to be rectified. I think that B.C. is going to have to find a way to rectify it sooner rather than later, and I think it is a most legitimate criticism of us by those folks in Alaska that don't like it."

The trip up the Taku, Mallott said, was "just a ... further ratification" of the reasons to strengthen the working relationship between Alaska and the British Columbia government.

"The bottom line for us is that Alaska's interests are clearly, in a timely manner, in an appropriate manner, and in a very responsible manner, protected, and we will use every opportunity, we will use every tool that is available to us in order to achieve that," Mallott said.

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Bennett said those tools shouldn't yet involve the International Joint Commission, which many Southeast Alaskans concerned about transboundary mining have been working toward involving under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909.

"It's very much premature to start rushing towards, you know, one big solution that's going to make everybody feel better," Bennett said of IJC involvement.

First, he said, everyone needs to agree on the facts.

"One of the things we need to do is get the facts straight in terms of what exactly is going on in Northwestern British Columbia," Bennett said.

Bennett said there's a perception in Alaska that many of the transboundary mines the province is working toward approving are already in operation.

The Red Chris, in the Stikine River watershed, began operating this year, and the Brucejack, in the Unuk River watershed, recently received federal environmental approval.

“There is time to get this right,” he said of other proposed mines, like Kerr Sulphurets Mitchell, in the Unuk River watershed.

He also said there’s a perception that the independent panel report on Mount Polley Mine’s August 2014 tailings dam failure, released earlier this year, said dry stack tailings is the only real option.

“They in fact do not say that dry stack tailings is the only way to achieve best available technology,” Bennett said of the report. “If you have potentially acid-generating rock, you probably will want to put that underwater because it neutralizes the generation of acid ... All the experts in mining are well aware of that. There’s a variety of ways you can achieve best available technology ... Some folks have fastened onto the idea that the panel has said dry stack tailings is the only way to go, when in fact, they didn’t say that.”

The report, however, reads: “Improving technology to ensure against failures requires eliminating water both on and in the tailings: water on the surface, and water contained in the interparticle voids. Only this can provide the kind of failsafe redundancy that prevents releases no matter what ... Simply put, dam failures are reduced by reducing the number of dams that can fail.”

It added that “... Mount Polley has shown the intrinsic hazards associated with dual-purpose impoundments storing both water and tailings.”

It acknowledges the importance of the chemical stability Bennett mentioned, as well as the fact that water covers are a convenient way to arrest chemical reactions, but added that “chemical stability requires above all else that the tailings stay in one place” and recommends that “where applicable, alternatives to water covers should be aggressively pursued.”

The Red Chris, which was approved just a few business days after the report came out, uses a watered tailings facility.

Bennett says that B.C. will adopt and implement all seven of the panel’s recommendations and that he has a letter from one of the report’s authors attesting that dry stack tailings are not the only way.

“Anybody that says the Red Chris was permitted in contravention of the report just simply hasn’t read the report,” he said. “There are many, many things that have been said that are not correct.”

Trip goals

Over the course of the four days he’s in Southeast Alaska, Bennett said he aims to build trust between Alaska and B.C., to listen “to people that have interests in salmon” as well as state officials, fishermen and those in tourism and “to see what we can do to provide some comfort about B.C.’s mining processes.”

“We don’t have any illusions about coming here for four days and suddenly, you know, having everybody jumping up and down saying, ‘Well, isn’t it great that B.C.’s potentially going to build a mine upstream from

us?” he said. “What we hope for is an opportunity to have some respectful dialogue with people who have been expressing concerns.”

Bennett sought to find common ground with the concerned groups with whom he’s speaking, saying that he shares the same values as people here who are concerned. He added that he hunts and fishes himself. He and Mallott went fishing Tuesday.

“I understand why people feel so strongly about protecting what they have ... There’s a way of life here that has tremendous value, and the people who live here don’t want to lose that. I get that. I understand that,” he said.

B.C. also plans to offer Alaska additional access to the mine approval process and to “make it easier” to get information, which Bennett said he hopes will set environmental organizations and tribes at ease.

“Folks in Alaska, because they’re downstream of these proposed projects, have every right to know how we’re doing our work in B.C., and what evidence we’re basing our decisions on,” Bennett said.

Trip

Bennett arrived in Alaska Sunday evening with Cynthia Petrie, Chief of Staff; Wes Shoemaker, Deputy Minister for the Ministry of Environment; Dave Morel, Assistant Deputy Minister for the Ministry of Energy and Mines; Doug Hill, Mining Section Head of the Ministry of Environment’s Environmental Protection Division; Chris Hamilton, Senior Executive Lead Executive Project Director for the Ministry of Environment’s Environmental Assessment Office, and Tania Demchuk, Senior Environmental Geoscientist for the Ministry of Energy and Mines.

Bennett’s Juneau-based schedule runs through Wednesday; he’ll spend Thursday in Ketchikan.

Today, Bennett will attend a welcome lunch with Juneau mayor Merrill Sanford. He’ll also meet with Southeast Alaska tribes, Southeast Alaska seafood industry associations, and Alaska Mining industry and association members will have dinner at the Governor’s residence with Gov. Bill Walker, and, with Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott, will host an early afternoon press conference. Tuesday, they met with the state’s internal transboundary working group, the Southeast Conference board of directors and staff, and the Southeast Alaska legislative delegation. Thursday, Bennett, Mallott, Hamilton, Morel, Petrie and Blake will fly to Ketchikan to meet with the Ketchikan Indian Community representatives, have lunch with the Chamber of Commerce, and meet with the Alaska Miners Association. Other representatives will tour Greens Creek mine on Admiralty Island.

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