

## **BC's Mount Polley Mine to Re-Open; Alaskans to British Columbia: Your Downstream Neighbors are Watching**

By MARY KAUFFMAN

July 13, 2015  
Monday AM

(SitNews) - Southeast Alaskans expressed concern for the future of their most important salmon rivers after authorities in British Columbia, Canada announced last Thursday the re-opening of Mount Polley open pit copper/gold mine in south-central British Columbia. Officials granted the Mount Polley Mine conditional approval to resume limited operations. However, concerned Alaskans say the reopening is premature because recommended engineering, operational and safety changes have not been made.

Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett and Minister of Environment Mary Polak announced on July 9th that after careful evaluation, statutory decision-makers with the ministries of Energy and Mines and Environment have conditionally authorized the Mount Polley Mine Corporation to begin restricted operations.



The Mount Polley open pit copper/gold mine in south-central British Columbia.  
Photograph courtesy Imperial Metals Corporation

"This conditional restricted permit to re-start operations is the first of three significant steps the company needs to continue operation and does not include the ability to discharge water off the site," said Bennett. "In the early fall, the company will need a second conditional permit to treat and discharge water in order for operations to continue. Lastly, the company must submit a long-term water treatment and discharge plan to government by June 30, 2016. The mine will not be authorized to continue to operate long-term if it fails to complete either of the last two steps."

The Mount Polley Mine Corporation estimates it will take about 30 days before it can begin production now that ministry staff have amended the company's Mines Act and Environmental Management Act permits. During restricted operations, the company expects to provide jobs for up to 220 workers.

The amended Mines Act permit authorizes the company to operate at roughly half the rate of normal operations. The tailings facility will not be utilized during the operation. Mount Polley Mine will use Springer Pit, an existing open pit on the mine site, to manage the tailings.

"I know the re-start of the mine is welcome news for the communities of Likely, Williams Lake, 100 Mile House and the families that depend on the jobs the mine provides," said Bennett.

However, Alaskans are concerned. Less than a year ago, on August 4, 2014 a breach of the tailings storage facility dyke occurred, releasing 6.6 billion gallons of toxic waste including arsenic, lead, and nickel into salmon-producing lakes and streams of the Fraser River watershed.

In response to the collapse, during the September 2014 period, the Imperial Metals company recorded costs of \$67.4 million which included \$20.3 million incurred for response and recovery as well as initial rehabilitation and restoration activities of the Mount Polley mine. The \$67.4 million included a \$47.1 million provision for future costs related to the tailings dam breach, exclusive of estimated insurance recoveries.

Alaska Natives, commercial fishing interests, business owners, community leaders and others say they 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, and 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."

According to BC Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett and BC Minister of Environment Mary Polak's announcement, the following conditions are included under the amended Mines Act and Environmental Management Act permits and failure to meet these conditions will result in the shutdown of the mine:

- Water and tailings levels in Springer Pit must remain 20 metres below the top of the lowest pit edge (1,030 metres above sea level).
- No discharge off the mine site is authorized. The company must apply for a permit to treat and discharge water.
- Mount Polley Mining Corporation is not permitted to use its tailings storage facility (TSF).
- The company must pay an additional \$6.1 million reclamation security.
- A five-year mine plan and reclamation plan must be provided to government by Sept. 30, 2015.
- An updated surface and groundwater monitoring plan must be submitted for approval by July 31, 2015.
- A long-term water treatment and discharge plan must be submitted to government by June 30, 2016. The mine will not be permitted to continue to operate if it fails to meet this deadline.

"Ministry experts made the decision to issue the Environmental Management Act permit based on sound scientific evidence," said Polak. "Their due diligence, along with the extensive First Nations and public consultation that took place with this application provides confidence the permit could be issued without harming the environment."

Inspectors with the Ministry of Energy and Mines will be onsite during the initial start-up period and will conduct regular site inspections once the mine is operating. Additionally, permit conditions require the company to provide weekly reports to government, First Nations, the Cariboo Regional District the community of Likely, detailing water management and water quality results. If necessary, ministry inspectors have full authority to issue stop work orders for any area of the mine found to be in non-compliance.

"When re-start operations commence, protection of the environment will be ensured through the terms and conditions contained within the permit, as well as ongoing monitoring by ministry staff," added Polak.

Prior to approval, the company's re-start application included a 30-day public consultation period and underwent a detailed technical review by members of the mine development review committee (MDRC). The MDRC consisted of representatives from provincial agencies, First Nations, local governments (City of Williams Lake and Cariboo Regional District), the community of Likely, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and Environment Canada.

Sources of News:

Salmon Beyond Borders  
[www.salmonbeyondborders.org](http://www.salmonbeyondborders.org)

British Columbia Minister of Energy  
[gov.bc.ca](http://gov.bc.ca)

Imperial Metals Corporation - based in Vancouver, British Columbia

[www.imperialmetals.com](http://www.imperialmetals.com)