

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Canadian mining industry group launches tailings management review panel

By Gordon Hoekstra, Vancouver Sun March 17, 2015



Tailings and water from the Mount Polley tailings pond flush down Hazelton Creek and into Quesnel Lake near Likely, B.C. after the Aug. 4 tailings dam breach. The Mining Association of Canada announced Tuesday morning it has appointed a panel to review its tailings management program as a result of the Imperial Metals' Mount Polley tailings dam failure last summer.

Photograph by: JONATHAN HAYWARD , THE CANADIAN PRESS

The Mining Association of Canada announced Tuesday morning it has appointed a panel to review its tailings management program as a result of the Imperial Metals' Mount Polley tailings dam failure last summer.

The panel - comprised of geotechnical engineers and others representing environment and First Nation views - is meant to deliver a public report by the end of the year with recommendations on improving the industry audit program.

Among the list of issues that will be scrutinized by the panel are identifying controls necessary to prevent catastrophic failures, determining whether to accelerate the timing of thirdparty reviews and examining whether dam design should be included in the audit program.

The review will also examine the findings of a B.C. government-appointed three-member engineering panel that concluded the root cause of the Mount Polley failure was a design problem that failed to account for a weak glacial soil layer beneath the foundation of the dam. The panel also had other concerns, including that the dam slopes were steeper than originally designed and the failure to create proper beaches from finely ground rock, known as tailings, meant to provide a safety buffer between water and the dam.

The industry-appointed seven-member panel will be chaired by Doug Horswill, a former chair of the MAC board and a former senior official with Teck Resources, which operates several mines in British Columbia. The association said last year that it was assessing whether changes were needed to its safety and environment mine-management program because of the Mount Polley collapse.

MAC president Pierre Gratton said they took the step to create the panel because industry cannot afford to have even one tailings dam collapse.

"Let's ask ourselves all of the tough questions, and see where it takes us," Gratton said, arguing the audit program is already the best practice in the mining industry.

Horswill said the review was important to regain public trust. "Public confidence is very important for the long-term future of the industry," he said.

Alan Young, an official with the International Boreal Conservation Campaign, will also sit on the panel.

He said the panel was an important step for industry, and he was glad the findings would be made public. However, he said there are many dimensions to the problem, including government regulation of tailings dams.

The Mount Polley tailings dam collapse released millions of cubic metres of water and potentially toxic tailings into the Quesnel Lake watershed. Imperial Metals had been part of the MAC audit program for two years but has not released grades on its tailings management.

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