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B.C. mines minister thaws relations with Alaska

JUNEAU, Alaska - British Columbia's mines minister has broken the ice with southeast Alaska's fishing community over fears that upstream mining projects in the province could endanger their way of life.

But advocates said Wednesday that they still need a long-term strategy from Bill Bennett in the event of a Mount-Polley-type disaster that polluted waterways in B.C.'s Interior a year ago.

He spent three days conducting about 30 meetings with Alaskan government officials, tribal associations, commercial fishermen and conservationists.

It was the first time residents spoke directly with Bennett and gave him a tour along the Taku River, which they worry could become contaminated by a mining accident.

Many Alaskans became more opposed to mining in B.C.'s northwest after a tailings dam burst in August 2014. The Mount Polley breach spilled 24 million cubic metres of waste waters into rivers and streams.

Several groups agreed that meeting with Bennett on Wednesday led to some progress.

"He seemed to be a genuinely concerned guy," said Chris Zimmer, of Rivers Without Borders. "It's good that he himself hunts and fishes, because a lot of the concerns here are over the impact of mining on food, on water, on fish, on game and the things we feed our families and our businesses."

But Zimmer said the face-to-face meetings were just the first step.

"The jury is still out on whether we are going to get something from him that is going to address our concerns, because we're not down to that level of detail yet."

The groups' top request is for an international agreement under the Boundary Waters Treaty, which they say will provide assurances for compensation if a mining spill were to pollute their waterways.

"Fishermen want commitments ... to be backed up by the full force of the U.S. government and Crown, because that offers the greatest chance that they will be binding and upheld over time," Dale Kelley, executive director of the Alaska Trollers Association, said in a statement.

Following the meetings, Bennett said he didn't realize how much the Alaskans wanted financial guarantees to protect their businesses.

"I think there is a hopeful but, unfortunately, misplaced faith in the capacity of the Boundary Waters Treaty to resolve that particular issue," he said in an interview.

"If there was an easy and quick way to structure how compensation is paid out in an international, transboundary situation, it would have been done years and years ago."

The treaty would obligate B.C. and Alaska to ensure that neither jurisdiction contaminates each other's land and water, he said.

Bennett said he told the groups that the province and the state must demonstrate there's no possible way to deal with the issue on their own before the treaty could be activated.

"That came, I think, as a bit of a shock to the groups we met with," he said. "I think they believe it's a question of you just ask."

— Written by Tamsyn Burgmann in Vancouver

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By The Canadian Press