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Posted March 11, 2017 11:59 pm

By

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FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Don't trust B.C. on Tulsequah Chief Mine



Pools of toxic waste from the Tulsequah Chief Mine are seen next to the Tulsequah River, a tributary of the Taku River. (Chris Miller | For the Juneau Empire)

In June 2010, I visited the Tulsequah Chief Mine to see what was being done to halt the acid mine drainage flowing into the Tulsequah River, the largest tributary to the transboundary Taku River, since mine owner Redfern went bankrupt in March 2009. It was shocking to see the site, which sits right on the banks of the Tulsequah River, about 13 river miles upstream of the Alaska/British Columbia (B.C.) border and 40 miles northeast of Juneau, essentially abandoned and the orange acid mine drainage pooling up and draining into the Tulsequah River.

In 2013, I flew over the site and the highly toxic acid mine drainage was still flowing out of the mine and into the river. Chieftain Metals, which bought the mine after the Redfern bankruptcy proceedings in September 2010, was little more successful than Redfern in stopping the pollution. And the B.C. government continued to do little to enforce any meaningful cleanup,

hoping eventual mine development would somehow result in a halt to the pollution. After two bankruptcies, it seems clear the Tulsequah Chief simply isn't a viable mine. The province needs to assume the responsibility for stopping the acid mine drainage and closing down the mine.

An end may be in sight, but only if Alaskans continue to pressure Canadians to protect our common interests in transboundary watersheds. B.C. Minister Bill Bennett has indicated the province may step in and clean up the mess. This is by no means assured and it will take continued attention and pressure to end the 60-year saga of the Tulsequah Chief.

The March 5 article in the Empire on the Tulsequah focused on the science of the pollution and the handful of studies that have been done to-date. The science is clear, the mine site regularly exceeds Canadian water quality standards in multiple areas. The Canadians are relying on the old adage of, "the solution to pollution is dilution." After 60 years of pollution, we have no data on what the carrying capacity for the area was before the mine; other than firsthand stories of Atlin Tlingit who remember the Tulsequah teeming with coho salmon, and now there are few. Given the recent poor returns and ocean survival issues of king and coho salmon, shouldn't we be doing the utmost to protect our rivers to minimize actions like the Department of Fish and Game's closing spring sportfishing for kings in the Juneau area this season?

We cannot simply trust that B.C. will do the right thing. The ongoing Tulsequah Mine pollution and the Mount Polley tailings dam collapse in southeast B.C. in August 2014 are warning signs that the Canadian mine regulatory system is broken. This was demonstrated in a report by the B.C. Auditor General, in May 2016, which found, "compliance and enforcement activities of the mining sector are inadequate to protect the province from significant environmental risks."

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Once upon a time, there were wild salmon in the Thames, Seine and the many major waterways of Europe. They are gone. There were once Atlantic salmon swimming in the Charles River near Boston, and many other Eastern Seaboard rivers. They are gone. Wild salmon on the West Coast choked the Columbia River and the many rivers and streams that line the Western edge of the North American Continent. They too are almost gone.

This isn't a fairy tale, it is historical non-fiction; all of these places have two things in common, habitat destruction and lax enforcement of laws designed to protect salmon. Laws protecting salmon and their natal streams go back to the Magna Carta, and have been overlooked and unenforced for just as long.

The Taku is the most productive river in Southeast Alaska, with the region's largest run of coho and king salmon. Properly managed, it will continue to provide jobs, food, recreation and culture for thousands of people across Southeast Alaska. We have a robust constitution that gives us clear guidance to protect our resources to the maximum benefit of our peoples now and in the future. It is paramount that we also hold the B.C. government to the highest possible standards to protect our interests in the rivers that flow across our shared border.

• **Chris Miller is a professional photographer, based in Juneau, who focuses on commercial fisheries; he spent 10 days documenting the Canadian drift gillnet fishery in 2012 on the Taku River.**

