



Concerned Alaska Native, First Nation representatives attend Seabridge Gold annual meeting

By MARY CATHARINE MARTIN, Morris News Service-Alaska/Juneau Empire
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Alaska Native and First Nation representatives had some questions for a Canadian mining company at its annual meeting, concerned about a project's potential effects on their ancestral lands.

United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group representative Fred Olsen Jr., who is also tribal vice-president of the Organized Village of Kasaan, and Annita McPhee, former president of the Tahltan First Nation in British Columbia, this week attended the annual meeting of Seabridge Gold, the parent company of Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell. KSM is a large mine planned in the Unuk River watershed in British Columbia, which empties into Southeast Alaska. With Olsen and McPhee was Bonnie Gestring of Earthworks, an environmental organization that recently co-released, with Salmon Beyond Borders, a report questioning the investment value of the mine.

On behalf of the tribal work group, Olsen asked the company about its support of an International Joint Commission review. Many Southeast Alaskans, including municipalities, Alaska's congressional representatives, and tribes, have been pushing for an IJC review under the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty for more than a year.

"We've come to Toronto to ask Seabridge whether it will publicly support an International Joint commission review," Olsen said in a press release. "We're deeply concerned about the unprecedented downstream risks to our people, who rely on the health of our rivers for their livelihoods. As with the Pebble Mine, the long-term risks outweigh the rewards."

"Seabridge stated that it would not support an IJC review, despite requests by Alaska Tribes, the capital City of Juneau and others," Gestring wrote in an email after the meeting. "It said that the company had held numerous meetings, and provided plenty of opportunity for comment during the Canadian permitting process. It's disappointing that Seabridge wasn't responsive to this request, particularly after the Mount Polley catastrophe. Mining companies need to do more than make promises that it isn't 'business as usual.'"

McPhee, Gestring said, requested the company adhere to the recommendations of the independent Mount Polley Review Panel.

The panel earlier this year produced a report on the Aug. 8, 2014 tailings dam failure at Mount Polley. It said that the tailings dam techniques most BC mines use are outdated, and that they should begin to use dry-stack tailings, the same process that Greens Creek Mine on Admiralty Island uses. “Multiple failure modes” were in progress at the mine at the time it failed, the report said, adding that given past BC’s tailings dam history, at least two can be expected to fail in some way every ten years.

“...the company said that it is undertaking an independent expert panel review of the tailings dam design at KSM, but the company still proposes to use submerged tailings in a portion of the tailings dam. It contends that dry stack tailings aren’t feasible,” Gestring wrote. “We remain concerned about the continued use of submerged tailings, considering the expert panel’s strong recommendation that the industry needs to shift from submerged tailings to dry tailings to reduce the potential for long-term catastrophic failures.”

A Seabridge Gold representative did not return a call as of press time.

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