

# DESMOG CANADA

## CLEARING THE PR POLLUTION

### **B.C. Ignores Best Practices, Allows Mount Polley-style Tailings Dams on Alaska Border, New Report Finds**

By Judith Lavoie • Wednesday, March 23, 2016 - 10:08



New mines proposed for north-west B.C., close to the Alaska border, will have tailings dams similar to the one that collapsed at Mount Polley, despite recommendations of an expert panel that companies use other methods of storing waste, says an analysis written for a coalition of Canadian and U.S non-governmental organizations.

The new analysis, [Post-Mount Polley: Tailings Dam Safety in British Columbia](#), underlines the need for the province to immediately bring in firmer legislation and says it is time B.C. lived up to commitments to make the mining industry safer.

The [expert panel report on the 2014 Mount Polley disaster](#) — which sent 25 million cubic metres of slurry and waste water flooding into lakes and rivers surrounding the mine — recommended best available practices and technology be used for tailings storage, including dry stack technology where appropriate.

However, four major B.C. mines in the [Alaska/B.C transboundary region](#) are failing to implement those recommendations, meaning a similar dam breach could threaten the area's major salmon rivers, says the report released Tuesday.

The paper, written by Dave Chambers of the [Center for Science in Public Participation](#) on behalf of 15 groups including Earthworks, MiningWatch Canada, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the David Suzuki Foundation and Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, says that the [KSM](#), [Galore Creek](#), [Red Chris](#) and [Schaft Creek](#) mines all require dams two to six times higher than Mount Polley and that the tailings ponds will contain between seven and 27 times the volume of the Mount Polley pond.

“The mines proposed in the region are far beyond the scope and scale of Mount Polley and the consequences of another tailings dam failure are likely to be far worse,” Chambers said.

All the mines will generate acid waste meaning any failure would put the Unuk, Stikine and Nass watersheds at risk, [jeopardising the billion dollar fishing industry](#).

Red Chris, owned by [Imperial Metals](#) — the same company that owns Mount Polley — is the only one of those four mines in production, with the others in various stages of the environmental assessment and permitting process.

But, even though the dam at Red Chris has been completed, changes can be made to make it safer, according to the report.

Energy and mines ministry spokesman David Haslam said tailings storage at Red Chris has been the subject of three independent reviews, including one by experts retained by Tahltan First Nation.

“Our government is leading Canada in making changes to how mining is done and we will continue to work hard to ensure our policies are the best in the world,” he said.

But Chris Zimmer of [Rivers Without Borders](#) is sceptical and points to tougher reviews of projects in jurisdictions such as the Yukon.

B.C. seems to be continuing down the same path it has taken before, he said.

“Albert Einstein famously defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over expecting different results,” Zimmer said.

“But it shouldn’t take an Einstein to figure out that mines using Mount Polley’s mine waste disposal methods risk future Mount Polley-scale mine waste disasters.”

Although B.C. has implemented less important recommendations from the expert panel report, the province appears to be ignoring the most important one, Zimmer said.

“The fundamental recommendation was no more wet tailings. B.C. doesn’t seem to have learned the lesson here,” he said.

One problem is that B.C. seems to be looking at the immediate costs to companies, rather than the immense costs of an accident, according to Zimmer, who does not accept claims that alternative technology is not practical at the transboundary mines.

“From an engineering perspective, this is doable,” he said.

Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett said previously that the provincial government will implement

all the expert panel's recommendations and the province is currently undertaking a mining code review.

"The tailings storage facility portion of the code review is expected to be completed this spring and revisions could be legally in force by mid-2016," Haslam said.

"Government will also work with industry and professional organizations to ensure recommendations directed at them are implemented. It is anticipated this work will be completed by spring 2017."

Although the expert panel said, where practical, B.C. should move to best technologies, such as dry stack for tailings storage "the panel also noted that there are circumstances where other technologies are more appropriate, due to the need to neutralize chemicals in the tailings or challenges with dewatering the tailings," Haslam said.

A strong regulatory framework is needed because companies almost inevitably choose the cheapest option, said Ugo LaPointe of [Mining Watch Canada](#).

Slurry can be made thicker, even if a company cannot change entirely to dry stack tailings, and there are ways to make dams more stable than the design used at Mount Polley, said LaPointe, who wants a fundamental shift in the attitude towards safety in the mining industry.

Bennett said in 2014 that one Mount Polley disaster is one too many, LaPointe said.

"Two years later, it's time for him to make good on his promise and put these recommendations into policy and practice."

Last November, with a background of growing Alaskan concerns about the safety of B.C. mines, Premier Christy Clark and Alaska Governor Bill Walker signed a memorandum of understanding that strengthens collaboration on major mine developments on either side of the border.

However, a coalition of Alaskan business owners, fishermen, First Nations and politicians is continuing to call for the issue of development close to transboundary rivers to be [referred to the International Joint Commission](#).

*Image: Cariboo Regional District*