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CLEARING THE PR POLLUTION

Alaskans and British Columbians Want More Environmental Protection from Mining: New Poll

By Judith Lavoie • Thursday, October 8, 2015 - 16:16



British Columbians share the concerns of Alaskans about risks to the environment from mining operations and most want to see tougher mining laws and regulations in B.C., according to two polls released Thursday.

The [Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research](#) polls, commissioned by [SkeenaWild](#) in B.C. and [Salmon Beyond Borders](#) in Alaska, found 75 per cent of more than 800 British Columbians polled were concerned about a tailings dam break and 54 per cent felt, that under current rules, B.C. mining poses risks to health, the environment, fishing and tourism.

“These results show that the people of B.C. are not willing to give mining companies social licence to proceed with projects if they feel salmon, water and wildlife are at risk,” Greg Knox, SkeenaWild executive director, said.

The support for rule reforms was driven by concerns that existing land use rules, such as the Mineral Tenure Act, are pro-mining and threaten the province’s natural beauty.

More than 85 per cent said they would like to see the Mineral Tenure Act changed to give other uses the same priority as mining.

Thirty-nine per cent said the jobs and economic benefits of mining outweigh those risks, but many of those agreed that reforming B.C.’s mining laws would protect jobs by ensuring other key industries were not affected by a mining spill. Only 17 per cent said reforming mining laws would cost jobs and provincial revenues, meaning taxes would increase.

When asked about Northwest B.C., where a mining boom is underway, 68 per cent said conservation should be a higher priority than development because of the importance of salmon-bearing rivers and populations of animals such as grizzly bears.

Less than half approved of how the provincial government is regulating and monitoring mines. Suggested changes include ensuring mining companies have fully-funded plans for cleanup, closure and long-term management of tailings before approval is granted, a mandatory, industry-funded clean-up fund for projects in watersheds shared by Alaska and B.C. and mining no-go zones in sensitive areas such as key salmon watersheds.

The [2014 Mount Polley tailings pond dam collapse](#), which sent 24-million cubic metres of waste surging into lakes and waterways from the mine owned by Imperial Metals, has focused attention on the need for reforms, Knox said.

“Greater financial assurance from mining companies, stronger government oversight and monitoring and establishing certain areas, like key salmon habitat, off-limits to mining will go a long way to avoid opposition from First Nations and local communities,” he said.

The [B.C. government is accepting public submissions on reform](#) of rules dealing with mine tailings until Oct. 16.

In Alaska, where, in the wake of Mount Polley, there has been growing concern about B.C.’s mining regulations because of mines opening close to salmon-bearing rivers running into Southeast Alaska, the poll shows overwhelming support for increased protection.

Almost three-quarters of 500 Alaskans polled were concerned about a mining waste spill affecting shared watersheds. That number jumped to 86 per cent for those living in Southeast Alaska.

More than 75 per cent of respondents want Alaska to have a seat at an international table to address concerns about [B.C. mining in transboundary watersheds](#) and 45 per cent said their vote for a member of Congress would hinge on the candidate pushing for a seat at the table.

“This provides a clear mandate for significant action by government and industry to ensure B.C.’s mining development doesn’t harm salmon, water quality, jobs and way of life downstream,” said Heather Hardcastle of Salmon Beyond Borders.

The B.C. poll is subject to a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 per cent, 19 times out of 20 and the Alaska poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 per cent 19 times out of 20.