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CLEARING THE PR POLLUTION

Republican Senators from Alaska Ask John Kerry to Help Protect Rivers, Salmon from B.C.'s Dangerous Mining Practices

By [Judith Lavoie](#) • Friday, May 13, 2016 - 17:07



High-level international action is needed to ensure that southeast Alaskan rivers and fisheries are protected from B.C. mines along the B.C./Alaska border, say Alaska's federal representatives.

Concerns about the environmental safety of [mines in the transboundary region](#) have escalated since the [province's auditor general issued a scathing report](#) earlier this month on B.C.'s mining practices and Alaska's Congressional Delegation is now pushing for Secretary of State John Kerry to step in.

"We write to express our continuing concerns about the development of several hardrock mines in British Columbia and their potential effects on water quality in the transboundary rivers that flow from Canada into Southeast Alaska," says a letter to Kerry from the congressional delegation, made up of Senator Lisa Murkowski, Senator Dan Sullivan and Congressman Don Young, all of whom are Republicans.

The group points out that, like most Alaskans, they support responsible mining.

“But Alaskans need to have every confidence that mining activity in Canada is carried out just as safely as it is in our state. Yet, today, that confidence does not exist,” says the letter.

There is a history of Canadian acid mine waste affecting Southeast Alaska, says the letter, referring to the Tulsequah Chief Mine that has been leaking acid waste into the Taku River for decades.

“As [Canada continues to consider and approve new mines](#) in B.C. and Yukon, the [risk of additional impacts has increased](#),” says the letter.

“Water quality is an extremely important issue for Alaskans. Accordingly we ask that you and other officials from the Department of State raise these concerns with the governments of Canada and British Columbia.”

The letter points out that the report by Auditor General Carol Bellringer concludes that [B.C.’s monitoring and inspection of mines are inadequate](#) to protect from significant environmental risks and there are major gaps in resources, planning and tools.

The delegation wants Kerry to look at whether a referral of the issue to the International Joint Commission would be the best way to determine whether Canadian mines are following best practices in their treatment of waste water and acid-producing mine tailings, especially in light of “the scientific reviews of the causes of the Mount Polley tailing disposal dam failure.”

The [Mount Polley dam disaster](#) saw 25-million cubic metres of tailings, sludge and mining waste flood pristine drinking water near Williams Lake, B.C.

Under the 1909 [U.S.-Canada Boundary Waters Treaty](#), either nation can call for an International Joint Commission to be appointed to adjudicate water disputes.

“If problems do occur, either nation can seek damages against the other for provable economic impacts, provided there is sufficient evidence of damage,” the letter points out.

“Should there be an impact to the transboundary waters that flow from Canada to Alaska, our state’s [fisheries](#), [tourism](#) and [native peoples](#) could all be hurt.”

About [10 mines](#) are in various stages of exploration and permitting on the B.C. side of the border and an approval that particularly alarmed Alaskans was the Red Chris Mine in the Iskut/Stikine watersheds, which opened in 2015 and is owned by Imperial Metals, the same company that owns Mount Polley.

No response has yet been received from Kerry, but a spokesman for Kerry’s office told DeSmog Canada last year that they did not anticipate a referral to the International Joint Commission at that time and instead wanted to encourage cooperation between B.C. and Alaska.

Last November Alaska Governor Bill Walker and B.C. Premier Christy Clark [signed a non-binding memorandum of understanding](#) to establish a bilateral working group on the protection of transboundary waters, but critics say that is not sufficiently rigorous to ensure mine safety.

The letter from the congressional delegation is also asking that B.C. officials consider the cumulative effects of mining during review and approval processes and that there should be a more formal consultation process with U.S. agencies.

There should also be support for Environment Canada’s water quality study looking at the impact of mining on transboundary waters and funding for water quality testing on the U.S. side of the border to establish baseline data “so that the U.S. can file for damages in the event of mining-related damage from Canadian mines,” the group suggested.

Heather Hardcastle, campaign director for [Salmon Beyond Borders](#) said the letter is a powerful statement that underscores that Alaskans, regardless of political party, want Kerry to step in.

“The danger we’re facing here in Alaska is real and was reconfirmed by the recent B.C. auditor general’s warning,” Hardcastle said.

“We urge Secretary Kerry to stand up for American jobs and seek IJC involvement in this matter so Americans have a say in the protection of our resources shared by the U.S. and Canada.”

Almost 20,000 letters requesting the commission’s involvement have been delivered to Kerry, Hardcastle said.

Frederick Olsen Jr., chair of the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group, agreed an IJC review would help with a long-term approach to the protection of transboundary waters.

“Secretary Kerry has a lot on his plate. He has big fish to fry in our crazy world, but we need him to look over at us. We want to prevent fish from frying in our waters due to B.C.’s mine waste,” Olsen said.

Image: Conrad Beaudin/[Salmon Beyond Borders](#)