

## B.C. Mine Approvals 'Too Much, Too Fast,' Say Alaskans Downstream

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B.C.'s approval of a new mine in a trans-boundary watershed has added fuel to simmering Alaskan anger about the province's surge of mine development adjacent to the southeast Alaska border.

The province has [granted an environmental assessment certificate](#) to [Pretivm Resources Inc.](#) for the Brucejack gold and silver mine, about 65 kilometres northwest of Stewart and 40 kilometres upstream from the Alaskan border.

The underground mine, which has not yet received federal approval, will be close to the headwaters of the Unuk River, which flows from B.C. into Alaska. The Unuk is one of southeast Alaska's largest king (chinook) salmon rivers and drains into Misty Fjords National Monument, one of the state's most popular tourist destinations.

Brucejack is adjacent to the large Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell (KSM) mine, which received B.C. and federal government approval last year, despite strong opposition from Alaskan politicians, fishermen and tribal governments.

"It is too much, too fast," said Chris Zimmer, Alaska campaign director with [Rivers Without Borders](#).

"It is the cumulative effect of so many mines in salmon-producing areas. There is so much coming at us so fast without any long-term controls and the process is just not designed to look at cumulative effects over a big region."

According to a Ministry of Energy and Mines spokesman, there are 10 advanced mine development projects in northwest B.C. and numerous exploration projects.

Brucejack, with an estimated capital cost of \$450 million, would produce up to 2,700 tonnes of ore a day, create 500 jobs during the two-year construction period and 300 jobs during a minimum 16-year operating life, according to a ministry news release.

Appeals from the Alaskan side of the border for a federal panel review of KSM were ignored, so there is little hope the federal government will veto Brucejack, Zimmer said. It is expected that the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency will make a referral to the Environment Minister by late spring.

Tension about the number of mines planned for the trans-boundary area, close to the Unuk, Stikine, Nass and Taku rivers, was already high when the [Mount Polley tailings pond collapsed](#) last summer, confirming the worst fears of Alaskans about B.C.'s mine oversight and permitting process.

The report into the Mount Polley disaster promised that it would not be business as usual, but that has not deterred B.C., said Heather Hardcastle of [Salmon Beyond Borders](#).

One business day after release of a geotechnical report on the causes of the Mount Polley dam collapse, the [Red Chris mine opened](#) in the Stikine watershed. Red Chris is owned by [Imperial Metals](#), the same company that owns Mount Polley.

Even though the report recommends that tailings not be stored underwater and behind large dams, Red Chris has started to fill a tailings storage facility that utilizes just that technology, according to Salmon Beyond Borders.

However, tailings from Brucejack will be stored underground and in Brucejack Lake, eliminating the need for a tailings pond and dam.

"This reflects the best-available technology as recommended by the independent panel that investigated the Mount Polley failure," says the ministry news release.

The environmental assessment certificate has 15 conditions that the province says will ensure there will not be "significant adverse effects downstream from the mine and to the Unuk River."

B.C. has also asked for additional information on the effectiveness of the proposed water treatment plants and more modelling of local groundwater conditions.

That does not mollify worried Alaskans.

"To us it feels as if the pace of these projects in the transboundary region have accelerated, not decelerated," Hardcastle said.

"We are frustrated. We want to see real engagement happening between B.C. and Alaska and the U.S. and Canada. We are downstream from all these (projects) and we take all the risks with no benefits ... We want an equal seat at the table with B.C. and Canada to talk about the effect of multiple projects, not just project by project."

Several groups, hoping for strong support from Alaska Governor Bill Walker, are pushing for a review by the International Joint Commission, established in 1909 as part of the Boundary Waters Treaty and charged with resolving trans-boundary water disputes between the U.S. and Canada.

But Canada appears to be balking at that idea, said Zimmer, who is irritated by suggestions by B.C. Mines Minister Bill Bennett that problems could be addressed by a one-day symposium, bringing all parties together.

Alaskans also responded angrily last fall to Bennett's message that they would stop worrying if they understood how B.C. mines are reviewed and how much input the Alaskan government already has.

"That's pretty condescending," Zimmer said.

"Bill Bennett tells us we just don't understand and I think we understand too well."

- By Judith Lavoie, [DeSmog Canada](#)