



Empire Editorial: On the topic of transboundary mines, a response to Mr. Bill Bennett

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It's not often the Juneau Empire offers a rebuttal to a submitted column. Waging a back-and-forth war of words isn't fair for the other party. We buy ink by the barrel and have dedicated staff to get the word out online as well.

However, we must respond to the Feb. 24 My Turn penned by Bill Bennett, the Minister of Mines for British Columbia.

Let us start off by addressing the first portion of Mr. Bennet's piece when he states it was "unfortunate your editorial has seized upon the Mount Polley mine tailings storage facility failure to undermine the long tradition of respectful relations and co-operation between British Columbia and Alaska on mining development and environmental protection."

Perhaps Mr. Bennett has forgotten about the Tulsequah Chief Mine. Southeast Alaska has not forgotten.

The Tulsequah Chief Mine, located south of Juneau on the Taku River just across the Canadian border, has leached acid runoff into the Taku River since its closure in the 1950s. The Taku boasts notable salmon runs, the same runs which in turn give jobs to many commercial fishermen. There were efforts to revitalize the mine, but those failed for financial reasons and to this day acid continues to taint the Taku.

Alaskans — Native tribes, commercial fishermen, local governments and ordinary residents — feel it is not at all respectful to leave a mine in ruin, leaching acid runoff. Nor do we feel this is in any way an example of "environmental protection." Years ago, Alaska's leaders tried to have a dialogue on cleaning up the mine. Former Gov. Sarah Palin and others were largely ignored in their efforts, as this newspaper and others reported at the time.

As B.C. forges ahead with 30 new mines to add to the existing 123 along the transboundary region, we'd like to see a firmer grip on reality and less public relations spin from our Canadian neighbors. We need actual compromise and solutions.

Imagine, if you will, a scenario in which the rivers we share flow in the opposite direction, that all our mining efforts — some old and some new — were leaking, seeping toxins into your waterways, effectively threatening the success of the Canadian salmon industry. Would you still feel there was a “long tradition” of respect and cooperation across our boundary? Would you feel it acceptable if we were to deny your requests for independent reviews, as the B.C. government did when Alaskans asked for a review of the planned Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell Mine?

In the next section of your piece you state the Empire suggested “in B.C. we are somehow less responsible in developing our mining industry than you are in Alaska, or that we’re charging forward without due care for environmental protection.”

Mr. Bennett, there are a number of mines in B.C. that have not done good things for the surrounding environment. The concern from Alaskans stems simply from the desire to not have history repeat itself.

Take the Mount Washington Mine. This 32-acre mine was operational in the 1960s, but beginning in 1966, after the mine’s closure, the population of coho salmon that swam in the adjacent Tsolum River began to suffer. What was once a run of 15,000 fish dwindled to a low of 14 in 1987. According to the British Columbia government watershed assessment in 1995, “the fisheries resource is believed to have declined (by 90 percent) predominantly because of acid mine drainage from Mount Washington.” At one point, the fishery in the Tsolum generated as much as \$2 million per year for local communities. Today, the fishery isn’t worth the cost of bait.

Another example is the Britannia Copper Mine near Squamish, 37 miles north of Vancouver. It ceased operations in 1974. Today, millions of gallons of contaminated water flow from the mine each day via a large underwater outflow pipe into Britannia Creek, which eventually makes its way to the ocean. Robert McCandless, a mining specialist with Environment Canada, has said “there are huge areas devoid of life” and the mine is largely responsible for the disappearance of fish and shellfish from the area. By May 1997, it was reported that the only sign of life in Britannia Creek was some algae on rocks. According to estimates from B.C. reports, the cleanup could cost “several tens of millions.”

We read the Mount Polley Report, Mr. Bennett, and we hope you did, too. It clearly states the best way to ensure no tailings dams fail is to discontinue their use. At our neighboring Hecla Greens Creek Mine, a dry stack tailings facility is used. This technology, as noted in the report, is not only recommended but proven to work. Today, Greens Creek is a profitable facility and one Alaskans can be proud to support because our environmental concerns were addressed.

That said, Alaskans are reasonable. We understand that every mine is different. We understand each facility demands a unique solution for tailings storage. But we are concerned that solutions to prevent or completely eliminate a dam breach seem to be going unexplored. Red Chris, for instance, is already filling its tailings facility. Meanwhile, we have heard nothing on whether additional environmental protections have been put in place since the Mount Polley disaster.

Furthermore, you state Red Chris “has not received a permit to go into production.” Yet, a press release from the parent company Imperial Metals on March 2 stated “the plant’s full 12-hour operating shift, without stoppage, took place on February 22,” two days before we published your piece. “The plant milled approximately 15,500 tonnes during that 12-hour period,” the release stated. In February, Red Chris processed just over 193,000 metric tons producing about 2,400 metric tons of copper concentrate.

That sure sounds like “production” to us.

The Boundary Waters Treaty was signed in 1909 to prevent and resolve disputes over the use of the waters shared by Canada and the United States and to settle other transboundary issues. The treaty established the International Joint Commission to help carry out its provisions. We’ve seen the IJC address dozens of water quantity and quality issues since its inception and, while Mr. Bennett says it’s too early to get the IJC involved, we believe it’s the best way to find resolution because of a long track record of successes. Furthermore, if the environmental practices of B.C. are so thorough and extensive, the IJC should find just that and mining can continue as planned.

After all, Alaskan mining companies have to ensure they are doing their due diligence for managing tailings facilities on this side of the border; we simply ask that B.C. does the due diligence requested by Alaskans.