

Alaska asks John Kerry to raise B.C. mine pollution concerns with Canada

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British Columbia's downstream neighbours in Alaska have long been concerned about mining pollution flowing across the border.

Now that B.C.'s Auditor-General has confirmed that those fears are well founded, issuing an audit recently that found the province is doing a poor job of regulating its mines, three Alaskan politicians have elevated the issue in Washington.

In a letter sent on Thursday, Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan, and Congressman Don Young, urged U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to talk about it with the Canadian government.

"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," the letter states.

The Alaskans told Mr. Kerry that he should "utilize all measures at your disposal to address this issue at the international level."

What Alaska is worried about are proposed or newly opened mines on the Stikine, Taku and Unuk rivers in northwest B.C.

"Like most Alaskans, we strongly support responsible mining, including mines in southeast Alaska, 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," the letter states.

Alaskans were shaken two years ago, when a breach in a disposal pond at the Mount Polley mine sent 25 million cubic metres of waste water and tailings into Quesnel Lake. Although that accident did not threaten Alaska because the lake's waters flow south into the Fraser River, it was an example of what could go wrong under B.C. mining regulations.

A tailings pond breach on a mine in the Stikine, Taku or Unuk watersheds could cause major damage to Alaska's salmon fishery, which last year harvested 263 million fish worth about \$414-million (U.S.). Salmon are also key to Alaska's \$1.1-billion tourism industry, and are a cultural

cornerstone for native communities in the state.

In the letter, Mr. Kerry is asked to consider addressing Alaska's concerns through the U.S.-Canada Boundary Waters Treaty, which was signed in 1909 and requires both countries to avoid causing environmental damage to the other. Under the treaty, either nation can ask for an International Joint Commission (IJC) hearing, in which a tribunal of experts would be appointed to study an issue and recommend resolutions.

The letter asks Mr. Kerry to determine if the IJC "is a suitable venue to determine whether Canadian mines are following 'best practices' in treatment of wastewaters and acid-producing mine tailings – especially in light of the scientific reviews of the causes of the Mount Polley tailing disposal dam failure."

State officials underscore their concerns by quoting the Auditor-General's report, issued on May 3, which found the compliance and enforcement programs of both the Ministry of Energy and Mines and the Ministry of Environment were inadequate.

In the B.C. Legislature recently, NDP Leader John Horgan described the audit as "a scathing report" on the government's failure to protect the environment.

NDP MLA Norm Macdonald was so upset by the audit that he twice asked Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett to resign.

Mr. Bennett rejected the suggestion that he quit and said he is going to act on the auditor-general's recommendations for improving mine compliance.

Premier Christy Clark told the legislature that the Mount Polley accident was "a real wake-up call for everyone," but it was an isolated incident that was not indicative of how B.C.'s mining industry works.

British Columbia, she said, has "a reputation around the world as one of the best places – the most environmentally sound, the most safe – in the world in which to do mining."

She might think so, but that faith is not shared by Alaska, and if Mr. Kerry gives state leaders what they want, an international tribunal might soon have the issue under scrutiny.

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