



Good neighbors

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It's said good fences make good neighbors.

What then to make of the alarming news that continues to come out of British Columbia regarding the safety of the tailings dams in that region?

Tailings — a byproduct of mining that is essentially a sludge-like mix of unusable metals, minerals, rock and mining chemicals — are a potential threat to fisheries if they are released into vital waterways. When tailings are stored together with water used during the ore extraction process, the risk of such accidental exposure is much greater.

That risk was on display last year, when the tailings dam at the Mount Polley copper and gold mine broke, spilling 24 million cubic meters of wastewater into the surrounding area of B.C. That spill entered a watershed that is home to more than one million salmon, according to the Vancouver Sun. The B.C. government eventually declared the dam breach a disaster from which it will take years to recover.

There are more than 120 tailings dams in B.C., according to a new report, and it's important to note that when it comes to waterways — many of which empty into Southeast Alaska, an area heavily dependent on the fishing and tourism industries — there's no such thing as a fence.

Now, an independent report on the Mount Polley breach commissioned by the B.C. government and B.C. tribes has found a couple of alarming facts:

- The Mount Polley tailings dam failed because it did not account for the mix of glacial soil under it. However, there also were serious risks of overtopping and internal erosion, meaning the dam might have failed anyway.
- A calculated rate of tailings dam failure, combined with the 120-plus dams in the area, predicts two dam failures in B.C. every 10 years.

We'll repeat that: Right now, two B.C. dam failures are predicted every 10 years.

That rate of failure is obviously unacceptable.

Fishing, when practiced correctly, is a renewable resource. Not so with mining, and a tailings dam accident could potentially cripple a limitless resource that historically has supported Southeast Alaska residents.

Food for thought as the Canadian government advances the proposed KSM gold, copper and silver mine, which is located upstream of a river that empties into Behm Canal, literally in Ketchikan's backyard. (The proposed tailings dam for that mine would empty into another river system located in B.C.)

So, where do things stand?

We propose adopting a simplified version of the Hippocratic Oath when it comes to this kind of mining: First, do no harm.

The B.C. report recommends separating tailings from water to prevent the risk of more massive spills, a step mining companies in B.C. haven't done with existing dams because it adds expense.

That should certainly be explored. The report makes it clear that the status quo is not working.

This isn't about not mining; it's about not damaging the fisheries and tourism industries that are so important to this area.

Every government has the right to harvest its resources. But that right comes with a responsibility to the entire region.