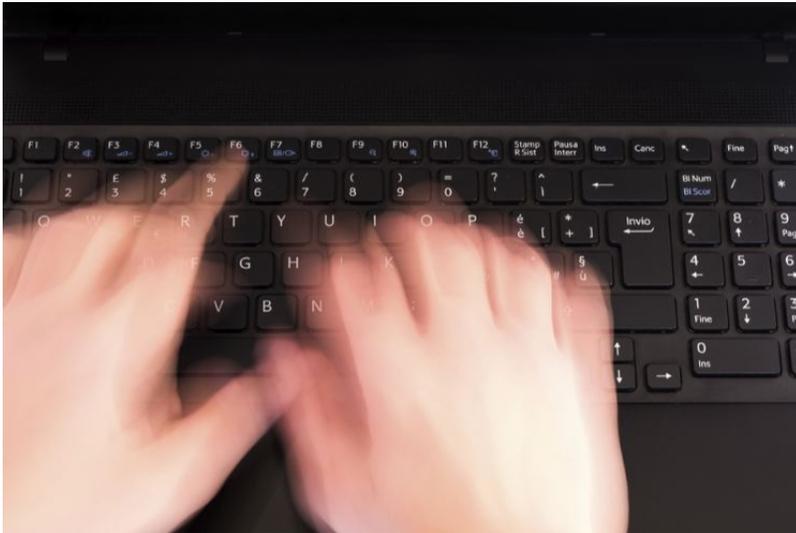


Good neighbours

Bev Sellars , and Carrie James / Prince George Citizen

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As delegates from across British Columbia gather in Mackenzie for the Minerals North Conference, a vastly bigger and more majestic event is taking place in northern B.C. that could in the near future be directly impacted by mining now being pursued in this region.

More than 300 million salmon smolt are making their way through the Skeena watershed to the estuary where they will pause before embarking on their three to five year saltwater journey. Many millions more are doing the same down the Stikine, Taku, and Unuk rivers to the coast, and down the mighty Fraser.

These rivers represent a massive, renewable resource that generates billions of dollars and supports and sustains native and non-native communities and businesses in B.C. and Alaska. This cannot, and must not, be put at risk by a rush to extract non-renewable minerals from the watersheds that are critical to the survival of these salmon and the people that depend on them.

B.C. First Nations and Alaska tribes are intrinsically connected to the watersheds and salmon. The Alaskan/B.C. border is irrelevant to these salmon and the people whose cultures and economies rely on them. There is no border when it comes to the impacts of mining on this vast and crucial resource.

What happens upstream, doesn't stay upstream; where waters flow, so can pollution. Rampant large-scale mining projects in B.C. threaten our trans-boundary salmon rivers and the downstream Alaskan communities.

To fail to properly and effectively address this threat would be a clear violation of a 1909 trans-boundary water agreement between Canada and the U.S. which states: "Water flowing across the boundary shall not be polluted on either side to the injury of health or property on the other."

Not only should we be better neighbours, we must be.

It is nearly a year since the Mount Polley tailings pond dam breach, which has opened the public's eyes to the flaws in the B.C. mining permitting and environmental assessment processes and the threats the industry poses to the environment, both in B.C. and Alaska. As per the expert panel report, B.C. can expect two tailings failures every decade. Which two watersheds, if nothing is done, will suffer before 2024?

A good place to start toward improving public confidence would be the full implementation of all the recommendations in the Mount Polley panel report. This would be a sign of good faith and a base on which other reforms, such as ending free-entry claims staking in B.C. and overhauling the province's weak environmental review and permitting processes, could follow.

Another sign of good faith would be to honour the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty by asking the International Joint Commission (IJC) to review the upstream mining developments in B.C. and the potential impacts on downstream communities in Alaska. Given the lack of consultation and opportunities for Alaskan Tribal groups to influence the decision making on upstream mining proposals, the IJC seems the best path forward for the region as a whole.

The importance of salmon to our peoples and the need to respect this cannot and should be underestimated, especially when considering the Tsilhqot'in historic Supreme Court victory in the William Case reaffirming title and rights, setting out rules for consultation and clearly stating the right of First Nations to protect their lands and waters for current and future generations.

If a reminder is needed of this importance to our peoples, one only has to look to the rejection this month by the Lax Kw'alaams of a \$1 billion natural gas project offer in favour of protecting their salmon and their way of life that depends on them.

Some might argue the mining industry is already weakened and cannot afford the actions and changes that are needed, but the reality is it cannot afford to oppose them. It is encumbered by its own bad track record, its failing international reputation, and the uncertainty that shrouds how it plans to work with First Nations. Its future depends on embracing reform and a new, better, greener, more respectful way of doing business.

We therefore urge the delegates at the Minerals North conference in Mackenzie to keep in mind the salmon and those of us who depend on them.

Former Xat'sull (Soda Creek) Chief Bev Sellars chairs BC's First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining, whose members are from various communities in British Columbia, including nations impacted by the Mount Polley disaster. Carrie James is the co-chair for the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group, a coalition of 13 federally recognized tribal governments in Southeast Alaska.

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