



# Home Runs: Alaska's leaders must walk their salmon talk

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Walk up to most houses in rural Southeast Alaska, including ours, and the first thing you see is an impossibly long row of battered XtraTuf rubber boots. There are boots for the family, the friends who stopped by to chat, extras for the summer folks who came to visit or work as crew, and probably a pair or two with mysterious origins. Together, they tell a story of a certain way of life, one lived by the tidelines and on the water, and one defined by adventure and hard work outdoors.

Wrangellite or Skagwegian, Republican or Democrat, Native or newcomer, our families are diverse. But our family values in this place do have a few common elements. Jars full of berries and fish are the obvious one. A commitment to taking care of friends and neighbors is another. I also look across the islands and fjords of our region and see that few of us are more than one degree of separation from a family whose livelihood depends on fishing or tourism dollars.

It's in reverence to our unique way of life, to these things that unify us, that today I'm asking Gov. Bill Walker to work harder for clean water, and to walk his talk about putting Alaska's fish first when it comes to policy. Because while all of us in Southeast Alaska kept up full-tilt fishing, recreation and harvest schedules over the last few weeks, our leaders made some quiet decisions about the future of our communities that make me wonder how "extra tough" their footwear really is.

I have yet to meet an Alaskan who actually wants a dozen Canadian mega mines built in the headwaters of our salmon rivers. Their short-term economic benefit would flow only to Canada, while we in Southeast would absorb the near certainty of perpetual pollution and catastrophic toxic spills. From Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, to the 13 tribes in the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group, from the Ketchikan assembly to a variety of fishing gear groups, everyone gets that these mines simply cannot go forward if we want abundant Southeast salmon for generations to come. With these mines, we risk the salmon that make us unique and that brings us together.

The Boundary Waters Treaty between the U.S. and Canada guarantees Alaska a real seat at the table on any decision Canada makes that could impact our waters downstream. This is not theory or advocacy, but a statement of legal fact. If Walker chooses, he can demand a real say in the permitting of new mega mines on the Stikine, Taku and Unuk rivers. He can also work with Secretary of State John Kerry to do the diplomatic legwork necessary to prevent the disastrous cumulative impacts of all these mines through an International Joint Commission. An IJC is the most common and effective way pollution disputes have been resolved in other places along our border with Canada.

Walker and Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott have talked about these ideas but their administration continues to look the other way as Canada rubber stamps new mines near our communities. The governor's Internal Transboundary Waters Working Group has become adept at closed-door meetings, but has yet to offer any rigorous analysis or comments on a single Canadian mining permit.

Hundreds of Alaskans appealed to our governor after Red Chris Mine was granted permanent permits and Bruce Jack Mine was approved last month. The governor's response included the statement, "Our waters are the lifeblood of Alaska, and we will do all within our capabilities to ensure their quality is maintained."

Alaskans have every right to insist that this statement be backed up with tangible action, and quickly.

Busy with raising families and running businesses, many of us must watch as our leaders put the beating heart of our regional economy, our communities, our cultures and our families, into the hands of sketchy mining corporations with virtually no regulatory oversight. How did Canada respond when Imperial Metals Corp. destroyed a watershed with its Mount Polley Mine disaster? It fast-tracked the opening of its next mine — the Red Chris — in the sacred headwaters of our mighty Stikine. It is now allowing the rogue corporation to reopen Mount Polley Mine against the wishes of many of the First Nations people downstream.

We must call on Walker to stand strong where Canada has been weak. It may help for him to personally visit Wrangell, to take a jet boat ride up the Stikine and to speak with the families who've depended on the river for generations. It may help if he experiences the fastest free-flowing river in North America himself, to travel the delta that shelters and feeds thousands of migrating birds and gives Alaska one of its most lucrative Dungeness crab fisheries.

I understand that it is challenging to advocate for Alaska's salmon when international treaties and stubborn foreign mining corporations are part of the game. But Alaskans voted in a unity government because we were ready for leadership that would prioritize the things that unify us, even when it's not easy. I talked last night via satellite phone to my partner, who is averaging five hours of sleep this week as he hooks and cleans salmon on a 42-foot boat in five- to seven-foot seas by himself. I've learned that fishing for a living isn't easy either, but when it's your way of life, you put your boots on and do what needs to be done.

To Gov. Walker, fish come first for my family and for most families in Southeast Alaska. So don't put salmon second when it comes to making decisions that will reverberate in our state for generations to come. Alaskans have high hopes for your strong and successful unity government. Please, live up to them.

- Malena Marvin is the Executive Director of Southeast Alaska Conservation Council.