

Empire Editorial: Mining disasters must end with Mount Polley

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Two.

That's how many tailings dams holding back mine waste are expected to fail every decade in British Columbia.

Thirty.

That's the number of proposed mines and sites under advanced exploration in British Columbia right now.

Four thousand.

That's how many Olympic-sized pools worth of toxic sludge spilled out of the retention basin at the Mount Polley Mine on Aug. 4, 2014.

If you're not too concerned about these numbers, you should be. If you've glazed over news reports about the recent transboundary mining efforts across the border from Southeast Alaska, it's time to sit up and pay attention. There are big plans afoot — some with proposals eclipsing the Hoover Dam — that have the potential to decimate our way of life.

On Jan. 30 an independent review panel, established by British Columbia's government through the Ministry of Energy and Mines with support from the T'exelc and Xat'sull First Nations, found that design flaws were to blame for British Columbia's Mount Polley Mine tailings dam breach. The panel found the dam's design didn't fully account for environmental factors like glacial geology, it suffered from "overtopping" and internal erosion of the earthen walls.

In other words, if the dam wasn't destined to fail how it did, there were multiple other factors that would have eventually caused the same result.

In the report, the panel "firmly reject(ed) any notion that business as usual can continue." Instead, as noted in a Feb. 6 Empire article, the group recommended "B.C.'s mines change their tailings facilities so water and tailings are maintained separately, with water kept in a conventional water dam."

“Simply put, dam failures are reduced by reducing the number of dams that can fail,” the report stated.

As Alaskans who care about the health of our natural resources and as residents of a region where mines have been done well, we must ask that the recommendations of the Mount Polley report be implemented.

If not for all the aforementioned reasons, here’s why: One hundred twenty-three.

That’s how many active tailings dams, containing both tailings materials and water, are operating in British Columbia.

The effects of these dams go beyond borders. When they fail, mining gets a bad name. Our mines, run responsibly, suffer. Our economy suffers from their accidents.

B.C. officials should develop standards and guidelines specifically for tailings dams, or move toward filtered tailings technology or “dry stack” tailings altogether, much like what is done at Southeast Alaska mines. Right now, mines across our border are using 100-year-old designs and every negative news piece now and in the future will harm responsible projects here in Alaska.

Second, we ask for international intervention under the Boundary Waters Treaty. It’s time for the International Joint Commission to get involved. Our politicians have sent letters, our communities have formed working groups, concerned citizens have spoken out and resolutions have been signed. What more will it take?

Meanwhile, it appears large-scale mining efforts will continue for our neighbors to the east. Imperial Metals, the company behind Mount Polley, last week opened the Red Chris mine up the Stikine River watershed, which flows into Southeast just north of Wrangell. As planned, that tailings facility “will hold 300 million tons of tailings and will not follow the Mount Polley review panel’s recommendations,” according to the Empire report.

Even bigger dams and tailings facilities are planned in the near future. The time to act is now, before these are built.

Zero.

That should be the number of accidents we allow. If we permit another Mount Polley, the consequences won’t be counted in numbers. They’ll be counted in ruined lives.

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