



## My Turn: We're all in this together

Posted: February 29, 2016 - 1:01am

By [CYNTHIA WALLESZ](#)

FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

We're all in this together. Southeast Alaska is a network of rivers and streams that feed our bodies, lifestyles and pocketbooks. Concern that these precious waterways may become contaminated by the mining activity of our northern neighbors continues to mount as more folks learn about the lack of influence Alaska has over British Columbia's (BC) growing mining industry.

As commercial salmon fishermen, ensuring our salmon runs are healthy and sustainable is of paramount importance. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game expertly manages this resource to provide plentiful salmon for everyone forever. Commercial gillnetters of Southeast generated over \$18.8 million in ex-vessel value last year and the three rivers most at risk from BC's mining industry, the Stikine, Taku and Unuk, are major contributors to this impressive economic picture. Like the meandering rivers themselves, the dollars generated from our fishery wind throughout Southeast, Alaska and the United States.

As BC utilizes its upstream resources, it is their responsibility to manage the development so that downstream water quality and fisheries are not harmed. Yet history provokes concern and instills doubt among us that BC will not manage responsibly. The Mount Polley mine tailings dam failure in August 2014 that spilled 6 billion gallons of waste into one of Canada's premier salmon watersheds was a wakeup call on the danger of tailings dams. An independent scientist panel reviewed the dam failure and, despite its strong conclusion to halt tailings dams that store tailings with water, just last year BC permitted the Red Chris Mine in the Stikine River region for a tailings facility very similar to that at Mount Polley.

Doubt festers as we look towards Juneau where up the Taku River sits BC's Tulsequah Chief Mine. There, acid mine drainage continues to seep into our shared watershed despite two decades of inspections and cleanup orders. As the seepage continues, so do the violations of permits and Canadian federal law even after Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett personally saw the pollution last August and promised to make amends.

Alaskans aren't the only ones concerned. Our region's vulnerability is gaining attention and concern throughout the country and nearby Province. Along with thousands of others, we need enforceable protections from BC that our shared waters will remain of pure quality to support our fisheries and lifestyles. We need thorough, consistent, long-term scientific testing and monitoring of mines and tailings. Best mining practices must be used and detected pollution must be cleaned up immediately. It is critical to set up assurances where businesses, communities, tribes and Alaska will be financially compensated in case of severe loss.

How do we do all this? We understand that our state government can only go so far to protect us in this international realm. Thus, the next steps to protection include U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry discussing our concerns with Canadian officials. We urge our federal delegation, especially Senator Lisa Murkowski who has repeatedly voiced concern of this issue, to ensure these important conversations commence.

Such transboundary issues are not new and mechanisms are already established to help such conversations and guide necessary action. The Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 is designed to prevent and resolve disputes over the use of shared waters of the US and Canada. In 1912, the Treaty developed the International Joint Commission (IJC) to help both governments carry out its provisions. The Boundary Waters Treaty requires BC to manage transboundary rivers in a way that they "shall not be polluted on either side to the injury of health or

property on the other.” Let’s give these mechanisms a chance to protect us as they have done historically with other communities and regions.

Murkowski will be in Juneau this week. If you see her and are concerned about our transboundary waters, please let her know. Given the significant risks to our water quality, fisheries and livelihoods posed by BC mines, let’s join together and promote binding international solutions.

- Cynthia Wallesz is the Executive Director for United Southeast Alaska Gillnetters based in Petersburg.