



BC, Alaska to draft MOU for mine processes

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By [MARY CATHARINE MARTIN](#)



Michael Penn | Juneau Empire -

Rep. Cathy Muñoz, Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott, Sen. Dennis Egan and Rep. Sam Kito join a rally on the steps of the Alaska State Capitol on Wednesday to bring attention to the long-term protection of transboundary waters, principally the Taku, Stikine and Unuk watersheds.

The province of British Columbia and the State of Alaska will draft a memorandum of understanding regarding mines proposed for and located in transboundary watersheds in British Columbia, BC Minister of Energy and Mines William “Bill” Bennett and Lt. Gov. Byron Mallot announced Wednesday at a press conference.

Through the MOU, the State of Alaska and British Columbia hope to create a structured way for tribes, stakeholders, environmental groups, sport and commercial fishermen, tourism operators, and other concerned Southeast Alaskans to get information and share concerns about each stage of a mine in a transboundary watershed, including assessment, permitting, operation, closure and reclamation.

Bennett said he doesn’t have a guarantee from Alaska that the two will get to a point where the state will sign an MOU, but that’s what BC is hoping for.

“Our goal is to, obviously, ensure the environmental integrity, the pristine water quality of those river systems for all time,” Mallott said. “And we will vigorously act in Alaska’s interest to make sure that happens.... We

hope that we will be able to expand that process of openness, transparency and meaningful involvement throughout our long-term engagement.”

They also aim to involve tribes, first nations and industry in monitoring water quality in the watersheds affected, both for baseline and ongoing datasets.

Bennett said he would like to have the memorandum in place within 30 to 60 days.

“Such a document would not be engraved in stone,” Mallott said. “It would be living, based upon the needs and the changing circumstances as they may occur over time.”

An MOU and International Joint Commission or federal involvement are not mutually exclusive, Bennett said. Concerned Southeast Alaskans have been calling for the involvement of the IJC under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909. The IJC resolves disputes about transboundary waters.

“Signing a memorandum of understanding or a memorandum of agreement between a state and the province is a way for us to strengthen the relationship, and to create some structures around that relationship, so we have some direction going forward in how we’re going to do business. And for the life of me, I can’t see how it could be construed as a negative thing,” Bennett said. “It doesn’t preclude anything else.”

Alaska will continue to engage the federal government, Mallott said; he hopes to speak with Secretary of State John Kerry about transboundary mining when Kerry is in Alaska to “impress upon him the importance of this issue to both of our nations,” to let him know about state and provincial efforts to work together, and to make sure State Department officials keep updated on the issue.

For his part, Bennett said he welcomes federal Canadian government help if it is necessary.

One way the government may get involved, he said, is the issue of compensation to Alaskans “should the unthinkable happen.” That’s something some concerned Southeast Alaskans brought up to him over his time here so far, he said. Talks between the two countries were spurred forward following a tailings dam breach at the Mount Polley Mine in August 2014 that sent billions of gallons of toxic tailings into the Quesnel Lake watershed.

“It’s a very difficult issue, because it’s an issue that all neighboring countries, I think, wrestle with from time to time,” Mallott said. “Canada and the US have wrestled with this probably for 100 years... I think the federal governments need to be involved in that part of the discussion.”

Just the same, he said he thinks most issues can be resolved through provincial and state communication and cooperation.

“We are working to have that engagement with all of those interests who have a passionate, direct involvement with these systems,” Mallott said. “Others who have a more public policy orientation — all of those views, all of those perspectives are hugely important. And creating the opportunity for those views to be shared across the border from both directions, I think, will be hugely important and helpful going forward.”

It was the first time in more than 20 years for these kinds of international meetings, a release from Mallott's office said.

Bennett and a team from British Columbia were in Juneau for the first part of the week meeting with elected officials, tribes, miners, environmental organizations, fishermen and other stakeholders, as well as touring the Taku River. Today, Bennett and Mallott are in Ketchikan; other BC officials are touring Hecla Mining Company's Greens Creek Mine on Admiralty Island.

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See the Juneau Empire's Aug. 28 edition for a Q&A with Bennett.

Read an article about Bennett's thoughts on the defunct Tulsequah Chief Mine here: <http://juneauempire.com/local/2015-08-26/bc-mines-minister-talks-transbo...>