

Despite claims, proposed mine poses risk

By BRIAN LYNCH

A June 9 letter to the Ketchikan Daily News from Brent Murphy of Seabridge Gold, the company proposing to build the KSM mine, complained about alleged inaccurate information in the film "Uprivers." But Mr. Murphy himself has a long history of substantial inaccuracies and misleading statements about KSM.

He claims Alaska concerns about downstream effects are not justified because the KSM proposal received approvals under the British Columbia and Canadian environmental assessment processes. The Mount Polley mine, which had a massive tailings dam failure in August 2014, also had such approvals. And, for decades, B.C. officials have been assuring Alaska that the environmental re-

view process would result in the clean-up of the Tulsequah Chief mine, yet it continues to pour toxic acid mine drainage into the Taku watershed. B.C. coal mines in the Elk/Kootenai area that continue to pollute the Flathead River downstream in Montana with selenium also went through the B.C. assessment process.

Seabridge's proposal did provide risk assessments that predicted low probability of failures. However, it is highly likely that during the mine's operating life mistakes and unforeseen shortcomings will result. No large industrial operations operate flawlessly. The question is the degree of the problems that arise and the ability to respond quickly and effectively. The risk analysis did not say there would be no failures nor did the assessment provide for any funds for compensating downstream people

harmed by mine related pollution.

Mr. Murphy claims Alaska concerns were dealt with during the assessment process. Alaskans strongly disagree that our concerns were adequately addressed within that process. Comments from fishermen, fishing businesses, tourism operators, tribes, local governments, State of Alaska, and our members of Congress focused on the need for KSM to undergo a more thorough and rigorous assessment known as a panel review, yet that was denied by Canada.

Mr. Murphy has suggested that since the tailings dams drain into the Nass River system and not into the Unuk, Alaska need not be worried. In a July 19, 2017, letter to Rep. Louise Stutes, he wrote: "... the KSM tailings management facility drains entirely into Canadian waters and as such does not potentially affect any Alaskan interests."

While he is correct about the location of the dams, he is absolutely wrong about the potential to affect "any Alaskan interests." The KSM tailings facility drains into a tributary of the Nass River and under the Pacific Salmon Treaty there are commercial harvest sharing arrangements with Alaska for Nass sockeye salmon. Therefore, if there were a tailings dam failure at KSM it would definitely affect Alaska interests. Since this will be an acid-generating mine, such a failure would be far more lethal to salmon and likely have more long-term negative consequences than the Mt. Polley disaster.

Also, while it's true there are no tailings management facilities planned for any tributary of the

Unuk River, a failure of the water storage dam or the proposed and unproven water treatment plants draining into the Unuk River would result in the release of acid mine wastes or toxins such as selenium. Such a release could severely harm or destroy the Unuk River's existing fishery resources.

While Murphy may honestly believe the mine assessment processes are sufficiently thorough to protect downstream interests, the actual track record is something all together different. The plans and permits may predict adequate protections and safeguards but even the KSM assessment couldn't make any accurate predictions beyond 250 years due to the numerous uncertainties and lack of precedent. Yet, the closed mine would remain dangerous to downstream water quality and fisheries centuries beyond the operating life of the mine or Seabridge's plans for post-closure monitoring for 250 years.

Mr. Murphy's assertions that everything will be fine remind me of Mike Tyson's quote: "Everyone has a plan 'til they get punched in the mouth." Given the complexity, size and unproven nature of the KSM proposal, it's likely that sometime in its lifespan human error, extreme weather conditions, glaciers, or unforeseen factors are going to pop KSM in the jaw. When that happens, paperwork approvals and unproven assertions will be meaningless.

Brian Lynch is a former commercial fisheries biologist with Alaska Department of Fish and Game who retired in 2010 after a 30-year career with the department's Commercial Fisheries Division in Petersburg. He now works on transboundary mining issues for Rivers Without Borders.

POINT OF VIEW