



## Environmental groups ask B.C. to improve mining laws

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Environmental groups from Alaska and British Columbia are asking the BC government to implement independent oversight of mines and encourage the use of safer mine-waste technologies. The comments were submitted as part of B.C.'s review of its mining policies in response to the tailings dam spill at the Mount Polley Mine last summer.

Environmental groups from both sides of the border are asking British Columbia to step up its regulation of tailings dams as a [Code Review Committee considers changes](#) to B.C.'s mining laws.



This aerial image shows the Aug. 5, 2014, Mount Polley Mine tailings dam break and some of the damage downstream. (Photo courtesy Cariboo Regional District Emergency Operations Centre)

Tailings are waste materials leftover from mining operations, and in some cases, they are mixed with water and held behind large earthen dams.

The committee is trying to prevent more tailings dam spills by addressing recommendations made by an independent panel in the wake of the Mount Polley disaster. The [cause of the spill, according to that panel's investigation](#), was a problematic layer of clay under the dam that was not considered in its original design. It weakened the dam, leading to a collapse and breach.

Jill Weitz of Salmon Beyond Borders, an Alaska-based organization, said the group wants B.C. to take the panel recommendations seriously and focus on implementing the best available technology for dealing with mine waste.

“We also commented on how there’s the whole notion of stronger regulations, but also actually providing funding at the B.C. provincial level to enforce these improved regulations,” Weitz said.

Salmon Beyond Borders also wants mining companies and B.C. to give long-term financial assurance to communities downstream of mines.

Weitz said a lot of individual Alaskans submitted comments to the mining code review committee.

“This is another way for folks to feel more involved and to have a say, and I do think it was great that B.C. opened it up to Alaskans as individuals and organizations,” Weitz said.

Weitz said the code review is a good first step for the provincial government in response to Mount Polley, but a lot more needs to be done.

Amy Crook of Canada’s Fair Mining Collaborative agrees.

“Any regulatory and statutory regulation that affects mining needs to be reviewed rather than the small piece of the pie that the Ministry of Energy and Mines has opened for public review right now,” Crook said.

The Fair Mining group, along with other Canadian environmental groups, [submitted 111 pages of recommendations to the code review](#) committee. They want B.C. to move away from industry self-regulation by creating an Independent Tailings Review Board and public oversight committees for individual mines with tailings dams.

Crook used to work in Alaska on transboundary mining issues. She said Alaska and B.C. need to work together to understand differences between their mining laws and possibly find ways to combine their review processes.

“Back then, there was much more of an open exchange between both the public interests and the regulatory interests across the boundary. I would like to see that return and then go beyond that,” Crook said. “I think we need to be talking to each other very broadly about how we want to manage our watersheds which we share.”

The code review committee is made up of two representatives each from the mining industry, First Nations and mine labor unions. It is chaired by B.C.’s chief inspector of mines.

Ministry of Energy and Mines spokesman David Haslam said it is the first time First Nations representatives and public comments have been included in a mining code review. About 50 submissions came from First Nations, environmental organizations and the general public. An additional 1,400 submissions came in the form of template letters from environmental organizations.

The first half of the code review committee’s recommendations are expected to be complete by early 2016. Mining law revisions could be in place by the middle of next year.

B.C. also completed a review in October of all existing tailings storage facilities in the province. The mines ministry said it did not identify any immediate risks or safety concerns.

Meanwhile, [Mount Polley is operating part-time](#) and is applying for a permit to return to full production. And the Red Chris Mine, which opened this year in the Stikine River watershed, reports it is very close to its production targets.