



DESMOG CANADA
CLEARING THE PR POLLUTION

Living Downstream of B.C.'s Gold Rush: Alaska's Fishermen Fear End of 'Last Wild Frontier'

By [Judith Lavoie](#) • Wednesday, August 26, 2015 - 15:10

No fish in the car, warned the rental car attendant at Juneau airport, with the weary tone of someone who had cleaned too many fish guts out of returned vehicles. It was a warning underlined by signs in hotels pleading with guests not to clean fish in the hotel bathrooms.

Fishing is in the DNA of Southeast Alaskans, not only as a sport and common way of filling the freezer, but also as a driver of the state economy. So it is not surprising that the perceived threat presented by a [rush of mine applications on the B.C. side of the border](#) has brought together diverse groups who want B.C. to give Alaska an equal seat at the decision-making table and to have the issue referred for review to the [International Joint Commission](#).

"I can't conceive of not being able to fish for salmon. The grief would be too much to fathom," said Heather Hardcastle, co-owner of Taku River Reds who has been commercial fishing for most of her life.

"We share these waters and we share these fish. There has to be an international solution," she said.

Jill Weitz, Trout Unlimited outreach coordinator, wonders why Canadians are not taking the risk of pollution from the mines more seriously.

"This is one of the largest king salmon runs in Southeast Alaska. How is this not significant?" she asked, looking over the side of a boat into the waters of Taku Inlet.

It is a cruel joke that, for the second time in history, the richest minerals in the world have been found in the richest salmon habitat in the world, said Lindsey Bloom, as her gillnet dried in front of her Juneau home

Bloom was a commercial fisherman in Bristol Bay, Alaska, during a bitter fight against the proposed Pebble Mine, a project that is still wending its way through the courts, but which is unlikely to see the light of day in the face of widespread opposition and a report by the U.S Environmental Protection Agency saying the mine would threaten the \$1.5-billion annual commercial fishery.

"This is an absolute parallel," said Bloom.

It is similar because the upstream threat from up to a dozen mines, over a huge swathe of land, without any review of the cumulative impact, has brought people together in opposition, said Chris Zimmer of Rivers Without Borders.

“I have never seen Alaskans in the Southeast come together like this,” he said.

But the difference between Bristol Bay and the transboundary mines is that Alaskans are feeling powerless because all decisions are taken in B.C., although the rivers that support Southeast Alaska’s billion-dollar salmon industry flow from the B.C. headwaters into Alaska.

That is innately unfair, said Bloom, who hopes the international community will step in.

“In the past, the commercial fishermen overfished and we have had to evolve with a lot of policies that regulate how we fish, so it’s perfectly reasonable to ask the mining industry to stick to higher standards so there are not irreversible impacts,” she said, pointing to the [aftereffects of the Mount Polley dam breach](#).

“They do what they have to do to get permits and then shit happens. It’s time for the mining industry to do it differently,” she said.

B.C. Energy and Mines Minister [Bill Bennett is in Alaska](#) this week responding to Alaskans’ criticisms of B.C.’s approval of new mines.

Alaska’s policies have not been perfect, Zimmer conceded.

“But if these rivers flowed the other way, the question would be vastly different,” he said, imagining the outcry if there was a danger of Alaskan companies polluting the Fraser River or other iconic B.C. waterways.

The independent engineering panel report into the Mount Polley spill said business as usual could not continue in the B.C. mining industry and made recommendations ranging from using best practices and investigating more modern technologies for dealing with tailings to strengthening regulatory operations and improving dam safety guidelines.

The B.C. government has said independent tailings dam review boards will be mandatory for operating mines and a review this summer of the Health, Safety and Reclamation Code for Mines will determine how to implement the panel’s recommendations.



Commercial fisherman Pete Peterson with daughter Heather Hardcastle, Kirsten Shelton and father Jev Shelton, a former member of the Pacific Salmon Commission. Photo: Judith Lavoie.

But that is not sufficient for Len (Pete) Peterson and Jev Shelton, a former member of the Pacific Salmon Commission, who have been commercial fishermen for decades and who do not like Canada's attitude to either fishing or mine development.

Both have watched the lack of Canadian action on acid mine drainage from the Tulsequah Chief mine (which [Bennett is now saying](#) should be fixed) and the images of mine tailings and contaminated water rushing into rivers and lakes from the Mount Polley dam breach and they worry what could come their way from the mines on the other side of the Coast Mountains.

"There are enormous dangers from the earthen tailings pond dams," Peterson said.

"The Canadian system should be more like the U.S system. There's no way under the U.S system that you're going to have five mines permitted in the headwaters of important salmon streams and resources."

"There's no such thing as a benign tailings pond," agreed Shelton.

There is also the fear that, as has happened before, when mining companies get into financial trouble, they walk away leaving the mess, he said.

It is a concern underlined by an analysis of Seabridge Gold's Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell project by Earthworks and Salmon Beyond Borders, which concluded that the KSM economic feasibility analysis is based on unrealistic metals prices.

At Alaska Fly Fishing Goods, owner Brad Elfers mulls over the damage to Southeast Alaska's billion-dollar fishing industry that would result from a spill or acid leakage.

"My business is taking the risk and there's no upside for us," Elfers said.

"B.C. is making the decision and they don't have a particularly great track record to begin with. These mines are being fast-tracked. There's not a great deal of due diligence."

Fishing guide Matt Lubov has difficulty understanding why the B.C. government is willing to put such a valuable resource at risk.

"This could spell the end of the last true, wild frontier," he said.