



My Turn: Minister Bennett's words carry little weight for Alaskans

Posted: March 1, 2015 - 1:06am

By [MATT BOLINE](#)

FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

A recent editorial in the Juneau Empire by British Columbia Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett is a slap in the face to we Alaskans who derive our livelihoods from healthy fisheries.

For months now, we (Alaska's congressional delegation, its largest and most powerful tribal organizations, municipalities, and fishing and tourism organizations) have hammered on the U.S. State Department, the only entity with any international jurisdiction, to help us secure protection for our salmon, clean water, and jobs that are under threat from large-scale development in these globally significant watersheds that flow from B.C. into Alaska.

Wonky as it sounds, here is precisely what Alaskans want, and why Minister Bennett's words are nothing short of a patronizing insult that seeks to delegitimize our very valid concerns: We want the State Department to activate the International Joint Commission on this issue. Experts agree that the IJC is *the only* entity that can handle this complicated international issue, as its task is resolving transboundary water disputes between the United States and Canada. Yet, in his Feb. 24 "My Turn," Bennett cavalierly dismissed the call for an IJC intervention, but at the same time fails to provide any constructive ideas of his own regarding how to move forward.

What Bennett doesn't apparently understand is that our livelihoods are under threat as B.C. rapidly advances its pro-mining agenda along the border. More than 10 large-scale, acid-generating mines threaten these international and globally significant salmon watersheds, including but not limited to the Taku, Stikine and Unuk. In the wake of B.C.'s own catastrophic failure of the Mount Polley dam, are Alaskans supposed to be satisfied with sending in comments that Canada has absolutely no obligation to read or consider?

Bennett's boasts of transboundary cooperation when it comes to permitting large mines in Canada are a joke. He uses the recent Canadian approval of the KSM mine near Ketchikan, which is comparable in size to Pebble, as an example and stated that Alaska participated in that process through a "technical working group". Does allowing one state official to be involved in teleconferences and allowing the state of Alaska to submit public comments really carry weight? In fact, Canada outright rejected the call from thousands of Alaskans (and Canadians), former Gov. Sean Parnell, Alaska's congressional delegation, Southeast legislators, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a much higher level of scrutiny of the KSM project. Canada greenlighted KSM in December.

Most recently the “Mount Polley report” came out. This geotechnical investigation of what caused the catastrophic failure of the tailings dam illuminated a host of design flaws that ultimately sent 6.6 billion gallons of toxic sludge into a tributary of the Fraser River, one of Canada’s most important salmon producers. The report said B.C. was using 100-year-old technology to manage mine waste and predicted that two tailings dam failures will happen in B.C. every decade if no changes are made. These disasters could taint the Taku, Stikine and Unuk unless the State Department acts soon.

Bennett’s article tries to defend his decision to allow the Red Chris mine to begin operations within days of the Mount Polley report coming out. Red Chris, owned by Imperial Metals, the same company responsible for the Mount Polley disaster, lies in the headwaters of the salmon-rich Stikine River that reaches tidewater at Wrangell. The tailings facility at Red Chris has a similar design as that of Mount Polley, but it’s larger and will contain acid-generating rock. In his editorial, Bennett downplays the significance of this.

The Mount Polley report recommended the use of dry-stack tailings facilities instead of watered tailings impoundments. Dry stacking is more expensive, but it’s safer for the environment. Bennett committed himself to fully implementing the report’s recommendations. And yet, Red Chris is moving ahead with a Mount Polley-style dam.

Thanks for trying to address our concerns, Minister Bennett. But your hallow words aren’t going to cut it. We need the State Department to step it up — and now — before loaded Canadian guns go off in Alaskan waters.

- Matt Boline is a Juneau resident and works as a local fly fishing guide.