

Alaska Dispatch News

Commentary

Alaskans awaken to issues of mining, salmon and rivers we share with Canada



Melanie Brown
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Although my parents are from Western Alaska, I consider myself lucky to have been born in Sitka. Work opportunities took our family northward, but my life led me back to Southeast Alaska, where I have chosen to raise my children. It is a rich life with all the rivers, land and sea have to offer. We have friends who are good about sharing what they have and we are happy to reciprocate. We migrate along with the salmon to Bristol Bay every summer to be with our blood relatives and our home-river, but returning to Juneau for winter “fits our skin.” Not long after moving back here however, we learned of a looming threat to Southeast waters.

Many Alaskans are familiar with the proposed Pebble mine and its pros and cons. However, far fewer are aware of a similar issue in Southeast, where mines upstream in British Columbia threaten water quality and fisheries downstream in Alaska. The difference for Southeast is these mines provide little or no benefits to Alaska, only risks. British Columbia’s mining boom in the watersheds of three major rivers shared by the U.S. and Canada not only concerns our state, but, because of the border, is an international issue.

The transboundary Taku, Stikine and Unuk rivers begin in northwest British Columbia and flow through Southeast to the sea. On the Canadian side, multiple large-scale mining projects rivaling the

size of Pebble mine are in various stages of review, permitting and operation. The Taku, Stikine and Unuk rivers are life-giving waters to cultures -- Native and non-Native -- that rely on the health of these waterways and what they provide for the people. A recently published commentary (ADN, [Jan. 31 We Alaskans](#)) was a strong and hopeful indication that concern for these rivers is growing. Brendan Jones, a Sitka-based fisherman, penned “A Canadian Threat to Alaska Fishing,” and it provides a concise overview of the issue. The reach of The New York Times helped to extend the message.

On Feb. 8, Alaskans had the opportunity to learn more about Canadian mines, the threats they pose to Alaska, and what is being done. Attendees of the Alaska Forum on the Environment were offered a session on “Transboundary Mine Review.” It was presented in two parts and occupied a three-hour block of the afternoon. Jacinda Mack, a First Nations citizen from British Columbia who is dealing with the aftermath of the Mount Polley tailings disaster, presented with Rob Sanderson Jr. and Fred Olsen Jr., Southeast tribal leaders. Their words conveyed the cultural significance of the three rivers in Southeast and a glimpse of what happens when things go wrong.

Before any of the presenters spoke, Dennis McLerran, Environmental Protection Agency Region 10 administrator, took the time to open the dialogue and recognized the transboundary issue is one in great need of attention and solution finding. Michelle Hale of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation presented with Barbara Blake of Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott’s office on how the state of Alaska is addressing the issue. Guy Archibald of Inside Passage Waterkeeper offered a solution now being pursued under the Boundary Waters Treaty, and David Alnutt of EPA rounded out the session. In this discussion, I observed broadly represented perspectives that all seem to be working toward the common goal of striving to keep our rivers healthy and productive.

At last year’s forum, Mallott delivered a keynote speech that identified Southeast transboundary rivers as a concern the state needed to address. In Gov. Bill Walker’s recent State of the State address, he prominently mentioned the transboundary issue. Mallott’s omission of transboundary rivers in his keynote this year did not go unnoticed as many people are keenly interested in what action the state has taken over the last year to address the strong concerns raised by thousands of individual Alaskans, tribes, businesses and elected leaders. As a co-keynote speaker, McLerran reserved a prominent place in his speech for the issue and I am confident his agency will find significant ways to contribute.

That night also included a special event at TapRoot Public House in Spenard that celebrated our rivers and gave people a taste of Southeast salmon prepared by Delicious Dave Thorne. There was a screening [of the short film, "XBoundary"](#) produced by Anchorage’s own Ryan Peterson. The film conveys visually what words cannot, and is a worthwhile six minutes, to say the least. Live music from Kat Moore’s, “The Forest that Never Sleeps” was also part of the evening. The gathering pulled together AFE conference attendees from around the state and residents of Southcentral Alaska. That day and all that led up to it has done much to build a framework and basis for this growing dialogue on Southeast transboundary rivers. Whether readers have been following this concern already or are completely new to the issue, I hope they will join us and become part of this conversation that concerns all Alaskans.

Melanie Brown works with *Salmon Beyond Borders* to advocate for healthy watersheds in Southeast Alaska. She lives with her family in Juneau in the winter and fishes commercially in the summer. The views expressed here are the writer's own and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch News, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, email commentary@alaskadispatch.com. Send submissions shorter than 200 words to letters@alaskadispatch.com or [click here to submit via any web browser](#).