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JUNEAU -- Sitting portside on her family's commercial fishing vessel, Heather Hardcastle peers through a thin layer of smoke as far as she can see up the [Taku River](#) ^[1] Inlet. Behind her, sockeye, pink and chum salmon, plus an occasional coho, become trapped in the quarter-mile net trailing the stern.

She looks back, away from the smoke, and says, "My parents have always said you have to respect the salmon. It's given us our livelihood; it's given us our family; it's given us our place. This is all about the place and the salmon make the place."

While not oppressive, the smoke is clearly here to stay, having traveled northwest from a series of raging summertime British Columbia wildfires.

Almost mist-like, it serves as a metaphor for ongoing concerns of the Southeast fishing, tourism and tribal communities: the contamination threat lying upstream in British Columbia, where mineral mines are being developed, permitted or built.

Once considered hypothetical, contamination fears became real when a dam holding back a pond of tailings, or toxic waste materials, broke at [Imperial Metals Corp's Mount Polley gold and copper mine](#) ^[2] a year ago.

The Aug. 4, 2014, breach unleashed billions of gallons of gray sludge -- a thick slurry -- that coursed through various rivers and streams in British Columbia's central interior.

Alaska's waters were out of reach from this breach, but it's the sort of disaster that Hardcastle has warned about to anyone who would listen over the last three years.

Hardcastle, among others, hoped the incident would prompt the U.S. State Department to invoke the [Boundary Waters Treaty](#) ^[3] so the [International Joint Commission](#) ^[4] would closely scrutinize all mines along watersheds that flow into Southeast Alaska's bountiful rivers: the Stikine, the Taku and the Unuk, all waterways that hundreds of thousands of salmon return to each summer.

That review, however, requires agreement by both federal governments and, according to British Columbia officials, is neither necessary nor imminent.

Stakes are high for Alaska's Southeast panhandle, the source for one of the world's most productive salmon runs, with all five species finding their way into global markets. The area also attracts nearly 1 million visitors annually, responsible for \$571 million of the estimated \$1.8 billion of tourism money generated for the state's economy.

Now with Mount Polley receiving a restricted permit on July 9 to reopen as another mine 80 miles from the border, Hardcastle's angst continues.

“What’s it going to take for the U.S. and Canada to think this is important enough?” she says. “Another Mount Polley?”

Five open-pit mines

For now, five open-pit mines at various stages of completion have the attention of a group called Salmon Beyond Borders [5], a coalition of Alaskans concerned with the welfare of Southeast salmon. The mines are: the Tulsequah Chief near the Taku River; Red Chris, Schaft Creek and Galore Creek in the Stikine River watershed; and KSM, about 20 miles from the border in the Unuk River watershed. Taken together, these rivers don’t have the high profile of Bristol Bay, but they feature diverse systems. The Taku alone has seen salmon returns as high as 64,000 sockeye in the 9,000 kings, and 40,000 coho.

The specter of the Mount Polley breach looms heavy in Alaska because mine operator Imperial Metals recently began producing gold at the Red Chris site [6], about 80 miles upstream from where the Stikine empties into Frederick Sound north of Wrangell, an area that attracts commercial fishermen from Petersburg to the north.

The permitting of the Red Chris mine and reopening of Mount Polley has left Brian Lynch of Petersburg dubious, even though the structure of the tailings dams differs.

Petersburg is a coastal community of nearly 3,000 residents, where the fishing industry generates \$50 million in estimated earnings, according to state economic data.

‘No reason to trust them’

“The big part of Alaska’s fishing industry is the marketing of quality,” said Lynch, a retired Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist and the former executive director of the Petersburg Vessel Owner’s Association. “So the idea that you’re catching salmon in pristine waters could basically no longer be the case.”

Prior to the Mount Polley breach, Lynch and others said Canadian officials told them not to worry.

“I just see this as being a horrible risk, particularly with the designs of these tailings dams,” Lynch said. “These are different tailings, more acidic (than Mount Polley), so personally I don’t trust Canada. I don’t trust B.C. We have no reason to trust them whatsoever.”

An Imperial spokesman did not return calls for comment. Neither did anyone from the British Columbia Mining Association, but British Columbia Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett [7], who will visit Southeast Alaska soon, said he’s well aware of the trust issues. He pledged to do more.

“We are far more careful in British Columbia than it would seem to many people in Southeast Alaska,” Bennett said. “I’m not offended by that. People of Southeast Alaska don’t know a lot about how we do business in B.C.

“I can say very confidently that our rules for permitting mines and other natural resource activities on the land base are as strict and thorough as anywhere around the world.

“The notion that I see coming out of Southeast Alaska and in the media is that somehow it is the Wild West here in B.C., and it’s easy to permit mines. It’s just not borne out by the facts.”

Unlike the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, when the impacts were immediate, it could be years before

anyone knows the effects of the Mount Polley breach to area communities, said fisheries biologist Richard Holmes, who has lived near the mine for 40 years. Holmes says the incident has divided the town of Likely, B.C., plus other nearby communities, noting some are willing to eat fish from area streams and lakes, while others have simply moved away.

Alaskans should be on alert, he warned.

“I would be worried, very worried,” said Holmes, who adds he has done contract work at Mount Polley. “Once the mine is established, the rules change completely.

“The condition of permitting when they first built this mine was there was to be no water discharge from this facility. That certainly changed, with government support.”

‘Loading the gun’

In January, a panel released a 147-page report citing design flaws in the Mount Polley tailings dam, saying the dam’s weight became too much for its foundation, causing a breach “without warning.”

The panel’s chair, Norbert Morgenstern, a retired engineering professor from the University of Alberta, said the design failed to consider a glacial lake deposit at the dam’s foundation. In January, Morgenstern said the design flaws were akin to “loading the gun,” adding that the dam’s construction ultimately “pulled the trigger.”

The panel recommended seven changes moving forward, including enhanced regulatory oversight, prioritizing safety over economics during feasibility reviews, and expanding tailings dam design reviews.

Bennett said British Columbia and the industry are acting on the recommendations.

He added that Alaska officials with previous administrations as well as Gov. Bill Walker’s have been kept apprised of mining permit processes, including the prospective \$5 billion KSM project, 20 miles from Ketchikan in the Unuk River watershed. Developer Seabridge Gold is spending \$16 million on further exploration this summer.

“I think the basic concern about what is happening upstream from where you live, where you play and where you work is a completely legitimate concern,” Bennett said.

“What is missing from the dialogue between B.C. and Alaska is factual information that would, to some extent, alleviate that concern.”

Mallott’s measured approach

Bennett says he is planning a trip to Southeast Alaska later this month to meet with Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott and community leaders.

Bennett said work toward a memorandum of understanding between and Alaska and British Columbia political leaders is underway.

[Mallott visited British Columbia, including the breach site, in May and met Bennett during the trip](#)

[8].

Earlier this year, Gov. Bill Walker asked Mallott to lead a team made up of several cabinet members to review concerns and provide Alaska with an additional voice. While saying he’s not

afraid to take an outspoken stance, Mallott also values a measured approach.

“I found oftentimes if you go in with guns blazing, you get shot, too,” Mallott said. “To go in with guns blazing usually cuts off the opportunity with dialogue, the ability for advancement of ideas, the ability to find appropriate response.

“This not a short-term thing, the mines are not short term. It will transcend any government in place now. To have working relationships, dialogue and communication now is important.”

In a recent trip to Washington, D.C., Mallott met with Canadian officials, State Department officials and U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. After last year’s breach, Murkowski fired off a letter of concern to the Secretary of State John Kerry. “(T)his incident should compel the State Department to evaluate additional steps that may be warranted to safeguard U.S. interests,” Murkowski wrote.

Mallott returned to Alaska disappointed he could not convince a Canada-U.S. panel known as the International Joint Commission to intervene.

This would be done under the Boundary Waters Treaty, which states waters on one side of the border shall not be polluted to their detriment by waters flowing on the other side.

Mallott said he was told there was “no basis for action,” and that it had not risen to national focus. Still, he said, “I let the officials at the State Department and the Canadian Embassy know this was a discussion that needed to continue.”

‘Symbol of purity’

Commercial fisherman and wholesaler Kirk Hardcastle says there is an obvious need for mineral extraction, be it gold, copper or molybdenum. He notes that Juneau is home to two of Alaska’s five actively producing large-scale hardrock mines, Green’s Creek and Kensington.

But he’s says he is not willing to sacrifice one resource for another, though he fears that day could be closer than others are willing to concede.

His eyes narrow as if fighting the onset of a headache when thinking of the constant refrain from B.C. mine supporters who said the Mount Polley incident is a one-in-100-years event.

“It’s one in the past year; that’s what it is,” says Hardcastle during a break between fishing outings on the Taku River. “Maybe it’s one in 100 years, but one in 100 years doesn’t necessarily mean you get a free ride for the next 99 years. That’s just a statistic.

“Salmon is a symbol that extends way beyond the fish itself. It’s a symbol of purity. It’s a symbol of clean environment.”

Kirk and his father-in-law, Len Peterson, ply the Taku River waters, setting and hauling nets while working with company partners Winston and Renee Warr.

Most of the chum and pink salmon they catch make their way to a local processor, while sockeye, kings and coho are custom-shipped to clients in Lower 48 and Hawaii.

First they are cleaned on the Heather Anne with Kirk’s deft touch. He employs a technique called pressure bleeding that gets most of the blood out of fish veins.

Kirk inserts a hypodermic needle filled with saltwater inside the neck of the headless fish. Soon

blood gushes out, telling Hardcastle he has succeeded, presumably extending the freshness by several days.

Not all fish leaves the state. Some barely leave the area, finding its way aboard specialty cruise ships such as those owned by Dan Blanchard, CEO of Un-Cruise, which runs a fleet of boutique boats accommodating as few as 22 passengers. Blanchard serves Hardcastle's sockeye. "What's important for us in the travel business is we are bringing people to a pristine place and it needs to be maintained in that order," Blanchard said.

"(Passengers) want to know that it's vibrant. They want to see salmon. They want to see bears and the salmon brings the bears."

'Unacceptable'

Growing up in Northern California's wine country, the 43-year-old Kirk Hardcastle recalled his grandfather's stories of the salmon stacked like cordwood along the waterways.

Two generations later, nothing was left. Today, much like the rest of the Pacific Northwest, depleted California stocks are beginning to respond to habitat restoration.

It's a prohibitively long cycle, and one that awaits Alaska if things don't change, Hardcastle says.

"It's not like Alaska is that special," he said. "It's just the only place left for really good large-scale and small-scale environmental habitat for fisheries, for rainforest.

"So, I'll be damned if I'm going to let my grandchildren stand on a river bank and not have fish. That's unacceptable."

Steve Quinn is a Juneau-based freelance writer.

Correction: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly described Brian Lynch as a member of the Petersburg Vessel Owners Association. Lynch is the former executive director of that organization, but he resigned at the end of 2014.*

Canadian mines raising concerns in Alaska

Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell (KSM)

- **Watershed:** Unuk
- **Mine type:** Open pit, underground
- **Ore reserves:** 38.2 million ounces gold; 9.9 billion pounds copper
- **Developer:** Seabridge Gold
- **Status:** Embarked on a new drill program in May
- **Projected mine life:** 52 years
- **Tailings:** 2 billion tons

Galore Creek

- **Watershed:** Stikine/Isku
- **Mine type:** Open pit
- **Ore reserves:** 6.2 billion pounds copper; 4 million ounces gold; 65.8 million ounces silver
- **Developer:** NovaGold, Teck Resources Ltd.
- **Status:** Company re-evaluating assets with focus on Alaska's Donlin Creek
- **Projected mine life:** 18 years
- **Tailings:** 510 million tons

Schaft Creek

- **Watershed:** Stikine/Iskut
- **Mine type:** Open pit
- **Ore reserves:** 5.6 billion pounds copper; 5.8 million ounces gold; 363 million pounds molybdenum
- **Developer:** Teck Resources Ltd., Copper Fox
- **Status:** Company launching \$4.8 million fieldwork program this year.
- **Projected mine life:** 21 years
- **Tailings:** 812 tons

Red Chris

- **Watershed:** Stikine/Iskut
- **Mine type:** Open pit
- **Ore reserves:** 2.08 billion pounds copper; 1.32 million ounces gold
- **Developer:** Imperial Metals
- **Status:** First shipment of copper concentrate produced Feb. 17.
- **Projected mine life:** 28 years
- **Tailings:** 300 million tons

Tulsequah Chief

- **Watershed:** Taku River
- **Type:** Underground

- **Ore reserves:** Mainly zinc, with a total of 4.4 million tons
- **Developer:** Chieftain Metals Corp.
- **Status:** Permitted for construction
- **Projected mine life:** 11 years
- **Tailings:** 3 million tons.

Research: Steve Quinn

Source: Company reports

Source URL: <http://www.adn.com/article/20150816/mine-misgivings-proposed-mines-near-southeast-alaska-raise-concerns>

Links:

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taku_River

[2] <http://www.imperialmetals.com/s/MountPolleyMine.asp>

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boundary_Waters_Treaty_of_1909

[4] <http://www.ijc.org/en/>

[5] <http://www.salmonbeyondborders.org/>

[6] <http://www.imperialmetals.com/s/RedChris.asp>

[7] <https://news.gov.bc.ca/ministries/energy-and-mines/biography>

[8] <http://www.adn.com/article/20150804/mallott-says-state-department-wont-help-alaska-deal-threat-canadian-mines>