

# Mount Polley spill taints Alaska-B.C. mine relations

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A provincial government report that found the tailings pond dam at Mount Polley collapsed because it was built on a weak foundation has heightened concerns in Alaska about British Columbia's mine safety standards.

Commercial fishermen, native organizations and the mayors of two Alaska communities say they are worried the Red Chris mine, now being built in northern British Columbia by the same company that owns Mount Polley, poses a similar risk.

Both the company and the government, however, have issued assurances that the new mine is safe.

In a joint statement, the Alaskans say they “want to have an equal seat at the table with Canada in discussions about how and if watersheds shared by both countries are developed.”

The Red Chris copper-gold mine is currently under construction near Iskut, B.C. It is located near the headwaters of the Stikine, one of the most important salmon rivers flowing into Southeast Alaska. Several other B.C. mines are proposed in the area.

“The Mount Polley tailings dam was approved by Canadian regulators to last in perpetuity, yet it failed in less than 20 years. This is more evidence that B.C.'s aggressive mining plans could lead to harm on our fish, water and jobs,” said Heather Hardcastle, a commercial salmon fisher based in Juneau.

“A similar accident at a transboundary mine like Red Chris could release large quantities of tailings that are more toxic than the Mount Polley spill,” said Mim McConnell, mayor of Sitka.

“The Mount Polley disaster was a clear sign that B.C. cannot assure us transboundary waters and fish won’t be polluted by the province’s aggressive mining agenda.”

Mark Jensen, mayor of Petersburg, one of southeast Alaska’s largest fishing communities, said the report on the Mount Polley disaster “is a stark example of B.C.’s stewardship of a project that the government and the developer claimed was safe. We can’t let a similar accident taint the rivers of the transboundary region along the border between northwest B.C. and Southeast Alaska.”

Rob Sanderson Jr., co-chair of the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group, which represents 13 tribes in Alaska, said the B.C. report on Mount Polley “raises more concerns than it answers.”

The report, by an independent panel of geotechnical experts appointed by the B.C. government, found the tailings dam at Mount Polley collapsed because it had been built on a foundation that contained a layer of glacial till (fine sediment deposited by a glacier), which hadn’t been accounted for in the original engineering plan. As the dam grew higher to contain a growing amount of mine sludge, it increased pressure on the foundation until, after 18 years of safe operation, it suddenly gave way, releasing a flood of 10 million cubic metres of water and 4.5 cubic metres of fine sand.

B.C. Mines Minister Bill Bennett has repeatedly assured Alaska that the new mines being built in the northeast will be carefully monitored and built to high standards.

He said the Red Chris mine has been repeatedly examined and is safe.

“Red Chris is permitted and will be operating within days,” he said. “We have gone over their tailings impoundment facility six ways to Sunday ... it has had a lot of oversight.”

Mr. Bennett said the Red Chris mine site is “completely different” than Mount Polley and he pointed out that First Nations in the region have accepted the design.

Steve Roberston, vice-president of corporate affairs for Imperial Metals, said the Red Chris facility was re-examined in the wake of the Mount Polley accident.

“Obviously there’s going to be a re-look at all the mining tailings dams in B.C. to make sure similar conditions don’t exist in those areas and we’ve already checked Red Chris and we know that this is a safe structure,” he said. “We take safety and the integrity of our tailings facilities with very great concern and we’re going to make sure that we build mines that are safe and that are not going to fail.”

*With a report from Justine Hunter in Victoria*

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