

Mount Polley to re-open after last year's disaster

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Photo courtesy of the Cariboo Regional District Emergency Operations

FILE - CentreWater is shown spilling out of the tailings pond at the site of the Canadian Mount Polley Mine, owned by Imperial Metals, where an earthen dam broke this week. The breach enabled about 10 million cubic meters of water and 4.5 million cubic meters of sand to spill into waterways that connect to Southeast Alaska watersheds. The mine is located about 400 miles from Ketchikan.

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Two British Canadian ministries announced Thursday that they are allowing Imperial Metals Corporation to re-open Mount Polley mine after last August's tailings dam failure, which released billions of gallons of toxic tailings and contaminated water into the Quesnel Lake watershed. Southeast Alaskans concerned about Canada's mining boom decried the move, saying the authorization ignores detailed recommendations of an independent review panel whose report was released earlier this year.

This is the first of three steps Mount Polley will need to begin operating as it did this time last year, said Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett and Minister of Environment Mary Polak in a press release. They've granted the company the ability to begin conditional operations; it will not be able to release water from the site.

"In the early fall, the company will need a second conditional permit to treat and discharge water in order for operations to continue. Lastly, the company must submit a long-term water treatment and discharge plan to government by June 30, 2016. The mine will not be authorized to continue to operate long-term if it fails to complete either of the last two steps," Bennett said in the press release.

That does not address Southeast Alaskans' concerns, says Salmon Beyond Borders, an organization that describes itself as "a growing community of sport and commercial fishermen, community leaders, tribal citizens, First Nations, tourism and recreation business owners and concerned citizens united across the Alaska/British Columbia border."

"Alaska Natives, commercial fishing interests, business owners, community leaders and others are deeply concerned that the same 'develop at all costs' approach is being applied to mining in transboundary watersheds

in northern B.C., including the Taku, Stikine and Unuk rivers that flow into Alaska,” Salmon Beyond Borders’ press release said.

The group is especially concerned about the Red Chris, which Imperial Metals, the company behind Mount Polley, recently opened in the Stikine River watershed.

“Red Chris, which launched operations with little fanfare and no advanced notice to Alaskans, is bigger than Mount Polley, has greater potential to unleash acid mine drainage, and is subject to the same failed standards of design and oversight in place when Mount (Polley’s) dam collapsed,” the release said.

The company will be operating Mount Polley at about half-capacity, and will dump its tailings into an open pit instead of its tailings facility until it receives further permissions, the release said. Imperial Metals Corporation must also pay \$6.1 million reclamation security, update its surface and groundwater monitoring plan, have a long-term water treatment and discharge plan, and develop a five-year mine plan and reclamation plan by certain deadlines, the release said. The company will also provide weekly reports on water management and water quality to local stakeholders and the government, and government inspectors will inspect the mine regularly.

“The British Columbia and Canadian governments seem to be glossing over the Mount Polley disaster by ignoring the recommendations of mining experts who studied the dam failure and warned that the province should stop allowing the same risky tailings dam technology,” said Heather Hardcastle, a commercial fisherman and Salmon Beyond Borders coordinator, in the release.

The organization, as well as members of Alaska’s congressional delegation, cities, the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group and others are working to involve the International Joint Commission, which resolves disputes of boundary waters under the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty. British Columbia’s “rapid and aggressive mine development” could negatively affect Southeast Alaska’s fish, livelihoods and environment, they say.

“Alaska is now downstream from several of these mines and the risk of toxic pollution reaching our rivers is unacceptable for Alaskan and Canadian citizens who rely on clean water and healthy fish, and wildlife,” said Dale Kelley, executive director of the Alaska Trollers Association, in the release.

The company expects to begin operation in about 30 days — right around the Aug. 4 anniversary of last year’s spill.

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