

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Opinions

Mt. Polley's lessons for Alaska

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A massive tailings pond breach at the Mt. Polley mine in 2014 spilled 24 million cubic meters of mine waste into a British Columbia watershed. (Photo credit: Canadian Ministry of the Environment)

As someone whose family has lived for generations near Quesnel Lake, a watershed recently poisoned by British Columbia's irresponsible mining practices, I'm encouraged by Alaska's work toward protections for trans-boundary rivers and wild salmon shared by British Columbia and Alaska. I can't stress how diligent Alaskans must be to spare their trans-boundary rivers the destructive impacts that B.C. rivers have been dealt by corporate mining interests and the B.C. government's abdication of regulatory responsibility.

I'm a third-generation settler whose family has lived for more than a hundred years in the Quesnel River watershed in the Cariboo region of central B.C. My grandfather was a surveyor and engineer for the Gold Quartz Mining Company and did the majority of the layout for the 1930s mining town of Wells, B.C.

When Imperial Metals put forward its plans for the Mt. Polley mine, I questioned them, since they located the mine in one of the freshwater jewels of the planet, the Quesnel Lake/River watershed. Quesnel Lake, the sixth-

deepest lake in the world, is at the heart of a remarkable salmon nursery. It would strike wonder into the darkest corners of those afflicted with human supremacism.

On August 4, 2014, my worst nightmare came true. Twenty-four million cubic meters of toxic mine waste burst from the Imperial Metals Tailings Storage Facility into the Quesnel River watershed. The lack of cleanup response from Imperial Metals and complicit ineptitude from both the Liberal and New Democratic Party governments of B.C. during the past four years has only worsened the nightmare.

There has been no Polley Lake and Quesnel Lake toxic tailing cleanup attempted.

There have been no sanctions. Instead, the opposite has happened: Imperial Metals' permits to reopen mine and treated waste discharge into Quesnel Lake have been expedited. And Imperial Metals is currently discharging tainted water directly into the lake.

[At Alaska mining conference, talk of Pebble and Mount Polley]

There have been no charges. This includes the current NDP government's "stay" of any provincial regulations and laws being upheld. It closes off any option of an individual, community or First Nation bringing charges against Mt. Polley's owners for the impact the mine owners' negligence has had on their way of life.

Imperial Metals' and the B.C. government's pre- and post-breach operational disgrace must not be allowed to happen elsewhere. Based on the unconscionable tragedies of this region, I recommend the state of Alaska push for the following:

1. That the basis of any trans-boundary agreement with B.C. be predicated on B.C. first conducting a judicial inquiry into B.C. mining practices and regulations.
2. That any existing and future mines operating in the trans-boundary areas be fully bonded.
3. That any existing and future mines operating in the trans-boundary areas be based on best available technology and practices.

This isn't just a problem in Canada. Alaska, Montana, Idaho and Washington — the four other U.S. states bordering B.C. — also face pollution from abandoned, operating and planned B.C. mines. Right now, Teck Coal mines in B.C. are actively discharging more than B.C.'s legal limit of selenium — an element that causes deformities, infertility and death in fish — into the Elk-Kootenai watershed shared by B.C. and Montana. Teck Coal is discharging selenium at 50 times the concentration that is safe for aquatic life, and there are already deformities being seen in fish in the Elk River downstream of the mines.

No one even knows how to treat selenium at the scale needed for mines in the Elk-Kootenai system — or at other planned mines, including the Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell mine in the transboundary Unuk River shared by B.C. and Alaska. Teck Coal's selenium treatment plant on the Montana border was shut down because it was making the

selenium problem worse. Now, untreated contaminated water is flowing into Montana and Idaho from Teck's mines.

My community will be dealing with the negative impacts of the Imperial Metals Mount Polley mine disaster for centuries. Helping other jurisdictions to do whatever is necessary to never have to go through a similar tragedy is the only consolation I have.

Douglas Gook is an environmental activist and longtime resident of Quesnel, British Columbia.

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