

# My Turn: Can B.C. protect Southeast?

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We were among a group of fishing, environmental and tribal representatives who recently met with Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott, B.C. Mining Minister Bill Bennett and other officials on transboundary mining issues. Bennett's visit was largely the result of Alaskans' resistance to B.C.'s aggressive mining agenda and the risks it poses to our region.

Our organizations represent thousands of Southeast fishing families and businesses who fear development near the border could threaten water quality, habitat and the fish we rely upon. Last year's tailings breach at Mount Polley Mine and plans to open several massive acidic mines near our rivers heighten those concerns. While the meeting was a good first step to starting a discussion with Canada, it did not alleviate our concerns.

Bennett told us the status quo cannot continue and that he understands no amount of money or jobs is worth sacrificing our resource values. We absolutely agree. The minister promised more meetings and information about B.C.'s mine review process; he also mentioned his desire to build trust. To start gaining our trust, Bennett can work with Alaskans and our federal government to secure a binding, enforceable agreement between the U.S. and Canada that protects shared watersheds and secures our long-term financial interests in the event of mishaps. And, he can clean up Tulsequah Chief Mine.

Tulsequah Chief Mine has leached toxic mine waste into the Taku River watershed for decades, yet B.C. has failed to do anything beyond issuing citations. Bennett expressed surprise to see the mine just 18 miles from our capitol and said, "B.C. is going to have to find a way to rectify it sooner rather than later." Solving that problem very soon would certainly show commitment by the minister and help build trust.

The Mount Polley disaster and leakage at Tulsequah Chief Mine make Alaska fishermen skeptical that B.C. has the capacity to protect and rehabilitate the environment or restore the economy of our region. When asked how B.C. would compensate fishermen for their losses in the event of an accident, it was chilling to hear Bennett say, "I don't know."

A senior project director for B.C.'s Ministry of Environment said their current bonding structure doesn't cover individual businesses that may be harmed. Up-front financial assurances must include compensation for third-party losses, including those incurred by Alaska's fishing and processing sectors. It is also essential that bonds sufficiently cover such things as clean-up and perpetual monitoring and enforcement. Otherwise, we're saddling future generations with this problem — forever.

Alaska and the U.S. must demand from Canada enforceable measures and substantial bonding to help Alaskans when accidents happen — and they will happen. The expert panel on Mount Polley estimated that, barring significant change, two Canadian tailings dams could fail every 10 years. Mount Polley's clean up could top \$100 million. Red Chris and KSM mines also sit in the headwaters of Southeast rivers and will be far bigger, with more tailings, untested technology and more risk. What will be the cumulative impact of these mines and future ones? Money cannot replace a lost way of life or quickly restore priceless salmon habitat, but a strong agreement between nations could at least help ensure that Alaskans and their communities recapture lost income.

Bennett wants a Memorandum of Understanding between Alaska and B.C. MOU's are valuable for some cooperative efforts but are usually non-binding. The state must carefully craft such an MOU and reject anything that limits Alaska's ability to seek full restitution from Canada for mining disasters. Bennett acknowledged that transboundary waters are an international concern. Hopefully that's a sign that he will support a binding agreement between the U.S. and Canada. Such agreements and cooperative project reviews could potentially be facilitated under the existing Boundary Waters Treaty.

For Minister Bennett to earn our trust we need to see a strong, well-developed agreement between our nations and a cleaned-up Tulsequah Chief mine. With trust comes responsibility, and it will take responsible action and commitment between our state and neighboring province, as well as between the U.S. and Canada, to gain ours.

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