

## My Turn: Red Chris mine poses great risk

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By [REP. DAN ORTIZ](#)

FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

I have previously written and spoken about how important the seafood industry is to Alaska's economy, especially to those of us who live in Southeast Alaska. The industry accounted for 18 percent of all private-sector resident earnings in Southeast Alaska in 2011, according to a McDowell Group report. A 2010 study by TCW Economics found that commercial, sport and traditional and customary salmon fishing in Southeast Alaska is worth \$1 billion.

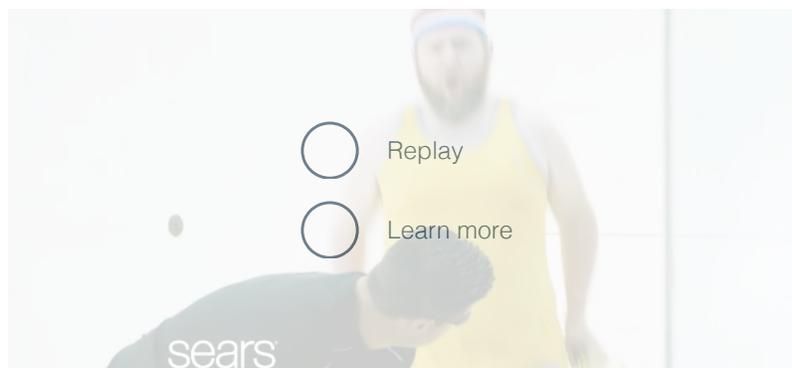
It is in the best interests of both our economy and our cultural values that our salmon runs stay strong for generations to come. Protecting Alaska's downstream salmon resources from widespread, large-scale mineral development upstream in neighboring British Columbia (B.C.) is a priority for me.

Alaska must insist that Canada uphold the agreement it made with the U.S. under our Boundary Waters Treaty, and ensure its activities do not harm our resources. Our countries are equally entitled to contribute to the determination of how shared watersheds are managed. At the very least, the state of Alaska and the federal government must demand a financial guarantee from Canada that is equal to the value of the Alaska resources put at risk by B.C. development.

Last week, Canada-based Imperial Metals, the same company responsible for last year's Mount Polley mine tailings dam failure in B.C.'s salmon-rich Fraser River watershed, gained a final operating permit for a similarly designed, much larger copper-gold mine called Red Chris in the transboundary Stikine River watershed.

While our mining industry in Alaska takes great care to design world-class mines that allow Alaskans to have both development and safe salmon, Canada does not ask its mines to reach the same high standards of operation. Red Chris, the first mine to operate in a shared B.C./AK watershed in recent years, poses great risk to Alaska. It is the location, size, largely acid-generating deposits and lack of review for this mine that concerns me. By approving Red Chris, B.C. has ignored its own government report that strongly recommended any new mining development in the province exclude wet tailings storage due to an "inevitability of failure."

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Red Chris is just one of a long list of open-pit and underground metal mines in various stages of assessment and permitting in the watersheds of the Taku, Stikine and Unuk rivers that originate in B.C. and empty into Southeast Alaska. Pollution from these mines would not only taint our rivers but the resources that sustain our communities and provide wild Alaska salmon to the globe. Indeed, Southeast Alaska is the most productive salmon-producing region in the world — and transboundary rivers are key drivers of this production.

Alaska must demand that Canada accept financial responsibility for the impacts of its risky endeavors in the headwaters of our rivers. The value of this compensation should at least be equal to Southeast Alaska's billion-dollar fishing industry and billion-dollar tourism industry that will take the brunt of the long-term cumulative effects from these mines.

Gov. Bill Walker and Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott have strongly advocated safe development. Sen. Lisa Murkowski has also called on the Canadian government to ensure the state has a “seat at the table,” our concerns are addressed, and our rights are upheld under the Boundary Waters Treaty.

I encourage those who have interests in the fishing and tourism industries, and concerned citizens who want to continue to practice recreational traditions like salmon derbies, to stand up and make your voices heard on this very important issue.

- Dan Ortiz is an Independent representing Ketchikan in the Alaska House of Representatives.

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