

# My Turn: What happens in Canada doesn't stay in Canada

Posted: September 16, 2016 - 12:02am

By [MARK JENSEN](#)

FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Alaskans are being asked to essentially bear all the risks and none of the economic benefits for nearly a dozen massive Canadian mines in the headwaters of the Taku, Stikine and Unuk transboundary rivers. This is not a typical ask, because Alaskans currently have no choice in the matter regarding how these mines are designed, permitted, built, operated or reclaimed. Nor do Alaskans have any specific assurances and guarantees that our water and fish will be protected or that any water pollution and damage to fisheries will be cleaned up or compensated for.

Last week in a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry, Alaska's entire Congressional Delegation again said what thousands of Southeast Alaska residents have said for years: We are not OK with this scenario. More specifically, their letter said, "Transboundary mining issues (must be treated) with urgency and focus today (that will) prevent discord and disaster tomorrow. ... The stakes for Alaska are enormous."

For Petersburg, where fishing is the lifeblood of our community, damage to our rivers and the fisheries they support would be catastrophic.

However, earlier in the week, as the delegation was finalizing the letter to Secretary Kerry, we learned that another B.C. mining company, Chieftain Metals, owner of the polluting Tulsequah Chief mine, is undergoing bankruptcy proceedings. Now that Chieftain has thrown in the towel, who will be responsible for halting the acid mine drainage into the Taku watershed, which has been flowing unabated for almost 60 years?

Chieftain is actually the second company that promised — and failed — to clean up the mess from this mine. If this pollution at this relatively small mine either can't or won't be cleaned up, then what hope do we have that much larger mines like Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell on the Unuk or Red Chris on the Stikine won't also pollute our waters?

Despite B.C. recently touting efforts to improve its mining regulations, very little has actually changed on the ground or in practice that would address Alaskan's concerns. After all, regulatory changes amount to nothing if not actually enforced. Currently, if a B.C. mining company goes bankrupt, there is no fund or funding mechanism provided to clean up what they leave behind, or what will inevitably flow into the waters of Southeast Alaska.

In addition to Tulsequah Chief, there is another real-world example that validates our concerns: Mount Polley mine, where in 2014 billions of gallons of toxic mining waste flowed downriver when its tailings dam burst. While the spill did not directly impact Alaska, it did impact subsistence harvests and communities along the route and the long-term effects on Fraser River sockeye remain of concern.

Since that time, no fines or criminal charges have been imposed on the mine's owner, Imperial Metals. In fact, it now operates the larger Red Chris mine at the headwaters of the transboundary Stikine River — and mining regulations and best practices have not been adequately revised, much less enforced. If the Mount Polley spill had flowed into Alaskan waterways, there would be no effective way for us to demand, let alone receive, compensation for what we would have lost.

Recognizing the failures of Imperial Metals and Chieftain Metals and the risks posed by the Tulsequah Chief and nearly a dozen mines like it, the Alaska delegation joined thousands of Southeast Alaskans later in the week to implore the U.S. Department of State to work with the Canadian government to enforce the existing federal tool that is the Boundary Waters Treaty and/or create an enforceable and proactive solution that will adequately protect Alaskan rivers and livelihoods from Canadian mining accidents in the first place, and ensures that Alaskans are compensated in the case that anything should occur that damages our waters.

Needless to say, the communities of Southeast Alaska appreciate the leadership from our Congressional Delegation and will support them to keep at it until the State Department works with Canada to address this international problem.

- Mark Jensen is the mayor of Petersburg.

---

## — Similar stories from JuneauEmpire.com —

AK delegation: State Department failing to address transboundary mines  
Sep 11, 2016

Yukon population falls to lowest in Canada  
Jun 17, 2016