



Review to Reopen Failed Mount Polley Mine Kicks Off April Fool's Day

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by [Sarah Berman](#)



Mount Polley spill. Photo by Kieran Oudshoorn

The company responsible for Canada's largest-ever mining waste spill has filed an application to reopen its collapsed Mount Polley copper and gold mine in British Columbia's central interior.

A spokesperson for BC's ministry of energy and mines confirmed the province accepted Imperial Metals' application for formal review on Friday, March 27. A month-long public consultation begins today, April 1. At least one resident near the disaster site says this amounts to a cruel April Fool's prank.

"I couldn't believe it," says Douglas Gook, Quesnel area forestry consultant. "One of the problems is—I've been phoning people like crazy—yet nobody's heard about it," he says of tonight's meeting, hosted by Imperial Metals. "I've signed up on all their email lists... only through other connections did I hear about this meeting."

Last summer's massive tailings dam failure spewed 25 million cubic metres of mining waste into Polley Lake, Quesnel Lake, and Hazeltine Creek. Joe Daniels, a Fraser Riverkeeper water advocate familiar with the remediation efforts, estimates less than one percent of the sludge and wastewater have been "recovered" since the disaster. Imperial has yet to repair the dam walls that contain mining byproducts including arsenic and mercury. There's also a pending investigation that could result in criminal charges.

Despite the minimal cleanup, ongoing inquiry, and potential safety hazards posed by the failed tailings pond, the open-pit copper and gold mine could be up and running again as early as June. While some locals are happy to go back to work at the mine, other residents, academics, environmental advocates, and First Nations are surprised and concerned by the provincial government's decision.

Because the old wastewater storage pit is still broken, the company has proposed to dump tailings in an unused mining pit instead. Mines ministry spokesperson David Haslam explains if the application is successful, mining will resume at Mount Polley's "Cariboo" pit, and waste will be stored in the mine's "Springer" pit.

This is a red flag for Will Koop, coordinator of the B.C. Tap Water Alliance. "One of the issues there is the pit is not secure," says Koop, who authored a 200-page report critical of the mine's engineering history, its management, and the environmental fallout since the Mount Polley disaster. Without proper lining, the wastewater could seep into local groundwater, he says.

When asked about this, Imperial Metals' VP corporate affairs Steve Robertson says, "nobody has brought up that concern." He says the pit is "solid bedrock" and the inflow

of water is very slow. By keeping the tailings under 1,030 metres above sea level, he says water will flow into the pit rather than out.

As for the old tailings pond, Koop sees lasting integrity issues that can't be fixed before June. "What's going to happen to that existing tailings storage facility?" he asks. "It's still holding a lot of toxic tailings—how are they going to secure that forever?"

Robertson dismisses this claim as well, adding the storage facility doesn't have any pressure inside it. "I would say the facility has been very well examined over the last seven months and there are no questions about the stability."

Daniels, whose background is in fisheries biology, says there's not enough research to move forward with a restart plan. He says the jury's still out on bioaccumulation of toxins in fish and animal tissue, for example. "I personally feel we're not going to know how tailings have impacted that ecosystem for five or 10 years," Daniels says. "I don't feel the science is there." So far the company has claimed the micron-sized sediment particles aren't small enough to be absorbed by wildlife.

Northern Shuswap Tribal Council mining response coordinator Jacinda Mack says she is concerned with the "expeditious" review timeline. "We are still in the beginning stages of consulting with the membership about this application," she wrote in an email yesterday. "Thirty days may not be enough time to go through everything." As of today, April 1, Mack is no longer mining response coordinator for the Northern Shuswap Tribal Council.

For every critic of the mine planning to attend the consultation, Gook says there's probably at least one supporter or Mount Polley worker choosing to stay home. "That component of the community hasn't been at the meetings," he says. (The union representing hundreds of the mineworkers came out in favour of a restart weeks after the disaster). "I'm hoping a lot of the reopen-the-mine supporters are there, because they need to hear this stuff."