



## British Columbia stonewalls on mine disaster: America take note

Posted on September 30, 2014 | By [Joel Connelly](#)



*This Tuesday, Aug. 5, 2014 aerial photo shows the damage caused by a tailings pond breach at the Mount Polley Mine in British Columbia. (AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Jonathan Hayward)*

**The collapse of a tailings dam on Aug. 4, at a big British Columbia mine, not only contaminated key salmon habitat but breached the credibility of B.C.'s government.**

The province's lack of transparency, and lackadaisical attitude toward warning signs at the Mount Polley Mine, should be a wakeup call on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border.

Why is this of concern to Washington or Alaska? What does a huge release of water and metal-laden tailings into Quesnel Lake have to do with the United States?

Plenty! Just look closely at a map of Southeast Alaska.

Big mines are being planned or on the verge of opening in the Stikine-Iskut, Unuk and Taku River systems, vitally important Alaska salmon streams all of which have their headwaters in British Columbia.

#### **Mount Polley Mine tailings pond breach**



*Cariboo Regional District*

*Debris from the Mount Polley Tailings Pond has traveled down the Hazelton Creek and stopped where the creek meets Quesnel Lake.*

The disaster at the Mount Polley mine “validates fears Alaska fishermen have regarding Canada’s development of large-scale bedrock mines” on trans-boundary rivers, Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, wrote in a letter to the U.S. State Department.

“We have to show these people that salmon have no boundaries,” Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., said last month when she and Begich toured an ocean acidification research facility in Seattle.

Stonewalling by the B.C. government underscores the need for the U.S. State Department to intervene and require an honest evaluation of hazards and the adequacy of safety features.

A Vancouver Sun reporter, Gordon Hoekstra, unearthed a 2010 inspection report at the Williams Lake library. It revealed that a 30 by 45 foot tension crack was discovered at the

Mount Polley Mine tailings dam four years before its collapse — in the same earthen embankment that ruptured on Aug. 4.

As well, 40 percent of the 92 instruments used to measure the buildup of water pressure at the dam were broken. A safety report outlined this problem four years before that.

In a devastating Monday column, Sun columnist Vaughn Palmer went over what the provincial government and Imperial Metals WON'T tell the news media about one of the province's greatest disasters. A few details:

- The provincial government has refused to discuss action it took after the tailings dam crack was discovered. “Was there a full-blown assessment of the tailings dam, as recommended by the inspector?” asked Palmer. Were measuring instruments replaced?
- The B.C. government refused to release inspection reports on the tailings dam for 2011, 2012 and 2013. B.C. Environment Minister Mark Polak has said providing information could “compromise” the ongoing investigation of the disaster.



*Upper reaches of Stikine-Iskut River system in British Columbia. Natives are blockading site of a big mine due to open this fall, operated by the same firm responsible for a disastrous tailings dam breach in August.*

- Imperial Metals has refused to discuss what it did about findings in the 2010 report, saying it would be “foolhardy” to comment now while the 2014 disaster is under investigation.
- The B.C. government has given no indication of heightened scrutiny of the Red Chris Mine, an Imperial Metals project due to open this year in upper reaches of the Stikine-Iskut river system. Nine pristine lakes, at the headwaters of the Iskut, lie below the mine site.

“Civic and corporate responsibility aside, self-interest alone would suggest that Imperial ought to build a great mine,” Wade Davis, a University of British Columbia anthropology professor, summer resident of the area and National Geographic writer, wrote recently on TheTyee.ca website.

The bottom line, however, is blunt: The British Columbia government cannot be trusted. The United States needs to intervene to protect the interest of Southeast Alaska's salmon fishery, in which boats from Puget Sound are a major participant.

Both Begich and Sen. Lisa Murkowski have urged Secretary of State John Kerry to put this on his radar screen. "I urge you to accelerate your work with your Canadian counterparts that new mining activities are subject to proper review and continued oversight," Murkowski said in a letter to Kerry.

The International Joint Commission, charged with resolving U.S.-Canada border issues, is the obvious agency to intervene.

Tahltan Indians, who live in the Stikine-Iskut, on Monday resumed a road blockade at the Red Chris Mine. They have spent years seeking to control and limit mining's imprint on an area of spectacular beauty that is rich in wildlife and fisheries. The site of Imperial's mine — Todagin Mountain — is home to the world's largest concentration of Stone sheep.

"To date, Imperial has been largely deaf to public concerns," wrote Davis.

The Stone sheep, and the salmon runs, won't be protected by a stonewalling British Columbia government. OK, John Kerry has a lot to do. But several of Alaska's great trans-boundary rivers deserve to be on his plate.

<http://blog.seattlepi.com/seattlepolitics/2014/09/30/british-columbia-stonewalls-on-mine-disaster-america-take-note/#25734101=0>