

# Minings real cost

GUEST EDITORIAL / PRINCE GEORGE CITIZEN  
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British Columbians now know that they are on the hook for cleaning up mining messes to the tune of hundreds of dollars for every man, woman and child in the province.

This certainly comes as no surprise to First Nations. Most British Columbians never experience the impacts of mining, but First Nations are all too familiar with seeing our lands taken and destroyed, our waters polluted, our fish and wildlife reduced, our rights and title ignored, our cultures undermined and our very way of life and future generations threatened.

The more puzzling question is this: why is the Liberal government of B.C. not rushing to hold mining companies accountable and responsible for the damage they can and do cause? It is not as if it is unaware of the problem, thanks to two detailed reports.

First, B.C. Auditor General Carol Bellringer issued a scathing report that put unfunded liabilities for mine clean-ups and remediation work in B.C. at \$1 billion. She also found B.C.'s underfunded monitoring system is failing to ensure mines are environmentally safe and meeting the conditions imposed on them when they got their permits.

Two weeks later, a detailed analysis by highly-respected economist Robyn Allan was released by the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, demonstrating that when everything is factored in, including clean-up costs for abandoned mines, taxpayers are liable for \$1.575 billion. That almost equals the \$1.7 billion being added for school building and maintenance in B.C. this year. Allan says this liability only takes us to 2014, when B.C. stopped releasing figures. It could be higher given a spate of accidents since then, including the Mount Polley tailings dam collapse.

Perhaps more alarming, Allan's report demonstrates that failing to ensure the industry is liable for its own mistakes and messes encourages bad mining. The drive to minimize costs and maximize profits is powerful and if companies know they might never have to pay for mistakes, they are more likely to ignore best practices and take risks.

So why has the B.C. government not committed to requiring, as Alaska and Quebec already do, that mining companies prove they have the cash or insurance coverage to handle any messes or remediation their projects require? Why does it not require them to create a fund to cover costs that are not met by insurance and for the clean-up of the abandoned mines that litter the province?

Some argue that with mining in the doldrums, this is the worst time to hit it with new financial requirements. Wrong. This is exactly when shortcuts are more likely to be taken, and therefore it is very much the right time for the government to act.

Yes this will make it impossible for weaker projects and less responsible companies to proceed. That's the point. First Nations are tired of living with the consequences created by such companies across B.C.

And what investor would want to fund anything but responsible, fully-costed projects that can stand the test of time? Allan's analysis demonstrates that when companies are required to assume liability for the risk and costs of mining accidents, waste is reduced, clean-up costs are lower, adherence to best practices is greater and there are fewer bankruptcies and corporate reorganizations.

The other side of the coin is monitoring. As the auditor general stated, the departments of energy and mines and the environment are not doing their jobs. Others have noted B.C. averages less in total environment fines per year than the Vancouver Public Library collects in book fines.

There have been calls for independent monitoring, which is something that can be done by First Nations, who know the land and ecosystems and have eons-old vested interests in making sure only the best projects proceed and that they live up to their promises.

We urge the province and the mining sector to work with our communities to build the capacity and training to perform monitoring and other on-the-land services. Which brings us back to the question, when can we expect them to do what the facts show they must?

The NDP has criticized the Liberal government for its reliance on corporate donations and said it has received \$800,000 from Mount Polley donors alone over the past decade. Surely the government will not let this prevent it from protecting taxpayers from almost \$1.6 billion, and climbing, in liabilities for mining messes.

-- Marilyn Baptiste, councillor with the Xení Gwet'in First Nations Government in the Nemiah Valley, west of Williams Lake

- See more at: <http://www.princegeorgecitizen.com/opinion/editorial/mining-s-real-cost-1.2261268#sthash.vbxTF5Ao.dpuf>