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Avoiding a new breach with Canada

By Bruce Wallace

Canada's new Prime Minister Justin Trudeau arrives in Washington this week to mend the friendship with the United States, one uncharacteristically strained under his predecessor.

The Keystone XL pipeline saga defined a fractious period between allies, and was an issue that caused discord between two neighbors with too much in common to afford distraction.

Our hemisphere is stronger when Canada and the United States lead based not just on a shared border but on shared values. Beyond the handshakes, speeches and state dinner, there's now a new looming environmental issue that should be addressed constructively and maturely between Prime Minister Trudeau and President Obama. They should make sure that mining in Western Canada does not become the new tar-sands oil from Alberta. They should pledge to avoid "the next Keystone" and speak candidly about the mining boom in British Columbia (B.C.) and the best mechanism to mitigate its fall-out now, before it irreversibly threatens neighboring Southeast Alaska.

In Northwest B.C., a modern-day Gold Rush is underway that could jeopardize Southeast Alaska's salmon, rivers, fishing and tourism jobs, and unique way of life. Weakened Canadian environmental regulations, the construction of a massive new power line and at least ten large-scale mines undergoing advanced exploration or development is turning this wild, rugged region of Canada into one of the world's largest mining districts.

These Canadian mining projects are located in the transboundary watersheds of globally significant salmon rivers—the Taku, Stikine and Unuk—that originate in B.C. and flow into Southeast Alaska. The boom times for B.C. offer few economic rewards for Alaska, but inevitable environmental risks in the form of acid mine drainage and toxic heavy metals, threatening communities, Alaska Native traditional and customary lifestyles, and the regional \$2 billion-dollar-a-year salmon fishing and tourism industries.

Alaskans who care about clean water and wild salmon are growing increasingly concerned about B.C.'s aggressive mine development in watersheds that drain into Southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest and famed Inside Passage – both national treasures. Our fears were exacerbated in August 2014 when the Mount Polley mine in central B.C. dumped six billion gallons of contamination into Canada's salmon-rich Fraser River watershed. Undeterred, Mount Polley's owner, Imperial Metals, was permitted six months later to open a new mine, Red Chris, in the headwaters of the

Stikine River, one of Alaska's most iconic rivers and biggest salmon producers. The Mount Polley disaster is a canary in the coalmine: pollution from B.C. mines flowing into Alaska could be another Mount Polley, on steroids.

The good news is that we don't need to repeat the drama of Keystone XL. These two governments can manage the Alaska/B.C. transboundary mining issues statutorily – using a mechanism one hundred years old. The president and prime minister can use the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty to manage the mining issue in these shared watersheds. International oversight under the treaty has succeeded, for more than a century, in resolving issues between the U.S. and Canada. The International Joint Commission (I.J.C.), a body created by the treaty, is the appropriate forum for the U.S. and Canada to engage in now to prevent disaster in transboundary rivers before it's too late. The I.J.C. can establish rules of the road to prevent a mining disaster and forge an agreement on how Alaska will be made whole if disaster strikes.

When he visited Alaska last summer, Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) said, "Downstream impacts should not be taken lightly by any country, anywhere." He can prove these comments were more than drive-by diplomacy. Treating Canadian mine development in shared watersheds with urgency and focus today is necessary to prevent discord and disaster tomorrow.

The question isn't whether Washington and Ottawa can respond; it's whether they will respond constructively — and in time.

The Keystone pipeline defined the low point of the U.S. - Canada relationship. Managing the Canadian mining threat can now be the foreign policy case study of how like-minded friends work together to ensure valuable shared resources are not harmed. The integrity of Alaska's rivers depends on it, so let's all hope that environmental diplomacy and not just poutine is on the menu at the state dinner.

Wallace is a commercial fisherman in Southeast Alaska and former president of the United Fishermen of Alaska.