

# It's time to clean up the Tulsequah Chief mine

In 2017, we reached a disappointing and unfortunate milestone in the transboundary Taku River watershed: Six decades of toxic acid mine drainage (AMD) from Tulsequah Chief mine, abandoned in 1957.

The Tulsequah River is the Taku's largest tributary and the mine site sits right on the banks of the Tulsequah, about 13 river miles upstream of the Alaska-British Columbia border and 40 miles northeast of Juneau.

The AMD from the mine site has created an associated "dead zone" documented by Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologists in the river area surrounding the entry of the AMD. The affected area is in what otherwise is productive salmon-rearing habitat.

As a Southeast Alaska commercial drift gillnet fisherman, the Taku is of vital importance to me and my family's livelihood.

The Taku's importance is not limited to my family, but is also critically important to other commercial, sport, and subsistence fishermen and to the overall health of Southeast Alaska's economy.

The Taku River is Southeast Alaska's single-largest producer of all species of salmon, and roughly 40 percent of the region's king salmon originate in the Taku. Taku River salmon account for an annual average of \$4.2 million in first wholesale value and \$6 million total annual output with approximately 400 people earning income directly from the commercial harvest.

The AMD violates the Canadian Fisheries Act, mine permits, an agreement with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, and possibly the Boundary Waters Treaty between the United States and Canada.

The Alaska government and fishing and conservation organi-

zations have long tried to compel B.C. officials to do something about the AMD – all to no avail. B.C.'s longstanding strategy to find a new mine operator to reopen the mine, eventually clean up the site, and stop the AMD discharge has been an abject disaster. This strategy failed twice and bankrupted two companies while still allowing the AMD discharge to continue unabated. It is now obvious that the only solution is to clean it up and close it down.

**In November of last year**, a joint letter from Alaska Gov. Bill Walker and Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott and Alaska's congressional delegation was sent to then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson seeking federal engagement in B.C.'s transboundary mining development. An issue of immediate concern to Alaska expressed in that letter was the cleanup of the Tulsequah Chief mine and the AMD discharge. This letter has resulted in the state of Alaska, the Alaska congressional delegation, the State Department, and the Environmental Protection Agency now working together to address Alaskans' concerns about the mine cleanup as well as impacts from even more extensive upstream B.C. mining.

In a series of follow-up letters between the State Department, Mallott, the EPA, and the B.C. Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, the need for cleanup of the mine was a primary concern.

In addition, Mallott and Alaska Sen. Dan Sullivan recently returned from a trip to Ottawa where Tulsequah Chief was a major issue. Sullivan also had a follow-up meeting with Canadian officials, and the senator was encouraged by the discussion regarding the cleanup of Tulsequah Chief.

**While it's encouraging** that B.C. and Canadian officials are finally acknowledging the need for mine cleanup and their desire to move forward, they have yet to advance any definite or specific commitments or actual plans for cleanup.

In fact, over the past three decades the B.C. government has repeatedly inspected the mine site and issued cleanup orders to multiple mine owners with the latest dated Oct. 27, 2017.

Given that Canadians and Americans all agree that the mine needs to be cleaned up and the AMD stopped, now would seem to be a golden opportunity for that to happen. Compared to other transboundary mining issues, this should be a relatively easy task to accomplish and would be a good signal that British Columbia intends to honor its commitment to responsible resource development.

However, it's still not happening. What is British Columbia waiting for?

Alaska apparently needs to be much more aggressive with British Columbia than it has been up to this point. We need action and we need it now. No amount of positive-sounding rhetoric from B.C. political leaders or agency officials will stop the AMD that continues to pollute the Taku River watershed.

All Southeast Alaska salmon fisheries are now faced with unprecedented restrictions on the harvest of king salmon destined for the Taku and other transboundary rivers – actions necessary to allow escapements sufficient to provide for future sustainable fisheries. Alaska is taking extreme measures looking toward the future. It's time that British Columbia and Canada do the same and clean up the Tulsequah Chief mine once and for all and demonstrate their commitment to the prevention of future mine waste pollution in the transboundary region's watersheds. My future livelihood depends on it. ↓

*Tyler Lappetito is a salmon gillnetter and halibut longliner out of Petersburg, Alaska.*

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