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B.C., Alaska sign cross border mining collaboration pact

Deal does not satisfy Alaskan environmental, fishing and First Nation groups

BY GORDON HOEKSTRA, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 25, 2015 6:25 PM



Demonstrators gather on the steps of the Alaska state Capitol Wednesday in Juneau, Alaska, to draw attention to concerns about the potential impacts of mine developments across the border in British Columbia on waters that flow into southeast Alaska. The B.C. and Alaska governments signed a co-operation agreement today that addresses mines that could affect transboundary watersheds and includes a promise to develop a joint water quality monitoring program.

The B.C. and Alaska governments signed a co-operation agreement Wednesday over mines that could affect trans-boundary rivers, and includes a promise to develop a joint water-quality monitoring program.

The agreement comes as pressure to address environmental concerns from Alaskan fishing, environmental, First Nation and community groups increased after the failure of Imperial Metal's Mount Polley mining waste dam last year.

The groups are concerned that proposed mines on the B.C. side of the border, such as the \$5.4-billion KSM gold-copper-silver mine and the existing Red Chris mine, could leach potentially toxic metals into watersheds that would harm salmon — the economic and cultural backbone of many Alaskan communities.

The groups said they were dismayed by the agreement revealed Wednesday because it does not include a mechanism to trigger an International Joint Commission under the Boundaries Waters Treaty to address their concerns.

Under the agreement, B.C. and Alaska will establish a bilateral working group on the protection of trans-boundary waters that will be made up of provincial and state officials. That group will be overseen by B.C. Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett and Alaskan Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott and is expected to be in place by early next year.

This group will manage the water-quality monitoring program and ensure results are made public.

The agreement was signed by Premier Christy Clark in Victoria and Gov. Bill Walker in Juneau.

"We have agreements with Idaho, Montana and Washington, and I think we had probably ignored Alaska for too long," Bennett said in an interview Wednesday.

"And once the public discussion really started to take place about potential mines in northwestern B.C., it became obvious we needed to reach out and to start to share information."

The working group is also meant to find ways for officials in Alaska to become more involved in B.C. environmental assessments and permitting processes of mining and other projects.

For example, Alaska will be invited to have a seat on mine review development committees that include B.C. government, regional government and First Nations representatives, said Bennett, who twice visited Alaska to hear first-hand their views on B.C. mining practices.

That way, Alaska will have representation on the ground level from the pre-application stage of a mine project, and through the environmental assessment and permitting process, said Bennett.

The bilateral group is also meant to find a way for Alaskan tribes, B.C. First Nations and other stakeholders to get better access to information about mines and other projects.

Bennett said while information is already available on B.C.'s Environmental Assessment Office's website, more effort will be made for the B.C. Energy and Mines to post information and inspections on its website, something that has begun following the Mount Polley failure.

The agreement also includes co-operation on other areas such as transportation safety and emergency management.

However, Alaskan groups — which includes Salmon Beyond Borders, the Alaska Trollers Association and the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Working Group — said they were blindsided by the agreement.

They noted they began taking part last week in Alaska's recently-established Transboundary Rivers Citizens Advisory Work Group, which was examining a draft statement of cooperation on mining.

They say the agreement signed Wednesday is not adequate to address their concerns.

"The thousands of Alaskans who have spoken out and asked for an international solution to this international problem will not stop and will certainly weigh in with the state of Alaska on the agreement's language that is fatally flawed," said Salmon Beyond Borders director Heather Hardcastle.

The Alaskan groups say they believe an international review under the Boundary Waters Treaty is the best way to develop specific binding commitments to ensure clean water, salmon, jobs and traditional and customary practices are not harmed by B.C. mines and that adequate financial assurances are in place to cover long-term monitoring and compensation for damages.

The agreement signed Wednesday is not binding and it does not set out compensation measures, the groups noted.

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