

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Opinion: B.C. government gambling with health of river, salmon

BY BERNIE MACK, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 3, 2015

Little more than a year after the catastrophic collapse of the tailings dam at the Mount Polley mine, where 17 million cubic metres of tailings water and more than seven million cubic metres of slurry poured into Hazeltine Creek and Quesnel Lake, what have we learned? Because now we see the B.C. government is rolling the dice on an even larger threat.

The Gibraltar Mine near Williams Lake is Canada's second-largest open-pit copper mine, with a tailings dam that holds back more than triple the amount of mining effluent released in the Mount Polley disaster. After the Mount Polley, the province ordered a "desktop review" of all tailings facilities in B.C. This simply involves going over documents: no independent due-diligence assessment has been undertaken to ensure that any of the tailings-management plans have been appropriately implemented. Gibraltar recently more than doubled in size and output and is already permitted to discharge mine effluent into the Fraser, although there has never been a comprehensive environmental effects assessment.

Now the B.C. environment ministry has given Gibraltar permission to increase its discharge of tailings into the Fraser River. The increase is more than 50 per cent — 5.4 million cubic metres from 3.5 million cubic metres. Local residents are faced with a choice that is neither palatable nor sustainable — they can live with it or they can face the growing risk of another tailings-pond disaster that would make Mount Polley look like a practice exercise.

This is a difficult situation for everyone. Yes, the mine brings important economic benefits for many area residents and families, and there are revenue opportunities for communities such as Williams Lake. But what about those who rely on the water for agricultural purposes, those who depend on salmon from the Fraser River, and the health of the Fraser River as a whole? The area downstream from the discharge pipe is a traditional fishing area for the people of the ?Esdilagh First Nation, but now our people have to travel over 200 kilometres to fish elsewhere. Quite simply, they no longer trust the safety of the salmon for eating.

This affects not only our daily lives, but also the lives and cultures of other communities. Salmon are cherished across B.C. and are also important for our international neighbours. Gibraltar has been dumping tailings effluent into the river for more than two years, but there is no integrated

management plan for the Fraser River system or any understanding of how much it can handle and when we reach the point of no return.

But there is a third option: a water-treatment plant. If this were a new mine, a water-treatment facility for discharged mine effluent would be a requirement for obtaining a permit. So why not for Gibraltar? Taseko, which operates the mine, even suggested such a measure to investors this summer in its bid for approval for the proposed New Prosperity gold-copper mine southeast of Williams Lake, but with this decision it seems the province has not raised its standards to meet the growing challenge.

Taseko recently approved \$300 million in mine improvements for Gibraltar. At an estimated cost of \$10 million, a water-treatment plant for the discharge would be slightly more than three per cent of that amount. We need Gibraltar to create a water-treatment facility now — the mine is still operating — to ensure our province's safety and security when the mine shuts down in the future, as well as avoiding the public costs incurred in cleanups like that of the old Britannia Mine on Howe Sound.

The salmon runs in Howe Sound are starting to recover, and, if we have learned anything the past, **we need to ask ourselves what the value of the salmon is to British Columbia, and the value of our way of life.** Today, both are at risk. ?Esdilagh is not opposed to mining and its role in the provincial economy, but increased discharge from Gibraltar will harm the quality of the river water and heighten risks to all who depend on it.

In the wake of Mount Polley, I would expect both the public and government would demand a new standard for water treatment. Safety within mining operations is clearly mandated, but safety does not end at the minehead: truly sustainable economic development for all communities demands that this policy of environmental gambling be stopped. **It's time for Taseko and the B.C. government to truly commit to being the best in the world when it comes to extractive-sector performance.**

Bernie Mack is Chief of the ?Esdilagh of Tsilhqot'in Nation.

<http://www.vancouversun.com/opinion/editorials/opinion+government+gambling+with+health+river+salmon/11490286/story.html>