

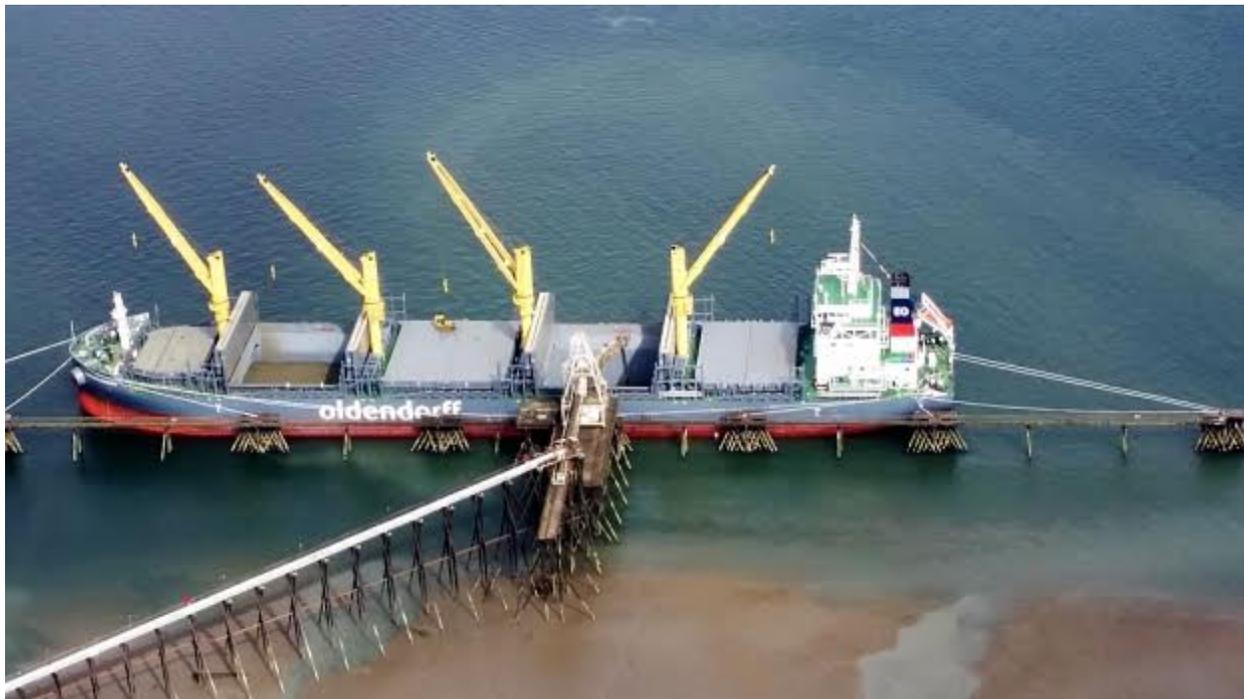
# THE VANCOUVER SUN

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## Stephen Hume: Clark needs to step up on environment

B.C. is fast earning a reputation as a bungler, both at home and abroad, on key environmental concerns

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST NOVEMBER 25, 2015



A shipment of copper concentrate from the new Red Chris mine is loaded in Stewart. Mine Minister Bill Bennett's assurances about new mines near the Alaska border was received in Alaska with emotions ranging from icy disbelief to rage.

Photograph by: Imperial Metals

Wednesday's agreement between Premier Christy Clark and Alaska Gov. Bill Walker promising protection for shared environments from new mining developments on trans-boundary salmon rivers won't quell the grassroots opposition swelling in the Northern U.S. state.

In fact, it might even make things more difficult for B.C.'s ambitious northwest development plans. Alaskan First Nations, fishing and environmental groups are already signalling a desire to trigger

U.S. federal intervention through the International Joint Commission under the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty. What happened to the Northern Gateway and Keystone XL pipelines — once promoted as a sure thing to carry Alberta's oilsands crude to tidewater — might serve as a cautionary examples.

And recent events in B.C. won't up the credibility quotient for provincial promises.

Let's see, in southern B.C. we have run-off that wasn't supposed to be there flowing where it wasn't supposed to go — into Shawnigan Lake — from a contaminated soil dump approved by the province on assurances that water shouldn't, wouldn't, couldn't leave the site.

Environment Minister Mary Polak at first seemed to imply this wasn't happening. Observers produced a video. The minister defaulted to the argument that even if water was coming off the site, it was safe.

Ministry officials then announced the province might suspend operations at the Cowichan Valley landfill. Why? Concerns about the operator's ability to ensure that surface water be contained and treated on the site as permits require.

Local householders — not your usual dreadlocks and drums agitators — have been getting themselves arrested trying to block trucks hauling in more contaminated soil. They say they don't trust their government.

Meanwhile, potential for crisis looms over the Mount Polley mine site, again. A temporary containment facility for tailings and water — approved over the objections of local First Nations — is apparently filling up with run-off faster than expected.

Municipal leaders, First Nations, even miners all warned last week that if the province doesn't facilitate, the short-term containment pond may leak untreated contents into groundwater.

Worse, some fear it might already be too late to treat and release sufficient water to offset what's entering and that a heavy winter snowfall and a quick spring melt will simply overflow.

Cariboo First Nations are furious. They say they warned the province that reopening the mine with temporary waste water containment was reckless. Mine workers are incensed by perceived foot-dragging on a permit to discharge treated water — which First Nations oppose. The mayor of Williams Lake warns mismanagement places the whole region at risk — the environment and the local economy with all the social fallout both entail. What a mess.

The common denominator? The province, which seems to lurch from shove-it-down-the-throat cantankerousness to regulatory timidity and rabbit-in-the-headlights process paralysis.

The big question that the premier must address when she returns from speechifying about how B.C. is a global leader in all things environmental is this: How does the province plan to counter the destructive effect of growing controversy over its apparent inability to manage what should be straightforward regulatory matters and the equally important optics surrounding them?

If citizens of B.C. lose trust in their own government, why assume that Alaskans would accept promises about the safety of mining development in the northwest, where new mines are planned and there are even bigger transboundary issues of fisheries and water quality?

Mining Minister Bill Bennett, pumping the government's tires on mine safety last February, wrote an op-ed piece for the Juneau Empire newspaper explaining the province's position. It earned an icy blizzard of contemptuous disbelief.

The newspaper itself responded to Bennett with a rebuttal, something it said it was loath to do for a submitted op-ed. But it felt compelled to note that an abandoned mine in B.C. is already leaching contaminants into a cross-boundary river. It called for "a firmer grip on reality and less public relations spin" from B.C. and urged an international panel to rule on it under the Boundary Waters Treaty.

University of Montana scientist Jack Stanford weighed in with an op-ed urging Alaskans to "reject the empty rhetoric and 'promise' of meaningless memorandums of understanding with B.C." over transboundary mining and water quality issues.

"Decades of experience with B.C. mines and their polluting effects on our shared, transboundary rivers — not to mention their polluting effects on B.C.'s own resources" triggered his skepticism, he said.

Fishing guide Matt Boline described Bennett's message as "a patronizing insult."

His op-ed observed that while the B.C. government's own independent report on Mount Polley recommended dry storage of tailings — more expensive but safer for the environment — and Bennett had committed to fully implementing its recommendations, the same company was moving ahead with the century-old technology of Mount Polley-style containment right on the Stikine River.

"Thanks for trying to address our concerns," Boline said. "But your hollow words aren't going to cut it. We need the State Department to step up — and now."

Clark better get on the domestic file before her government's growing environmental reputation further deteriorates, otherwise Wednesday's non-binding agreement could be non-binding indeed.

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