

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## Vaughn Palmer: No cracks in the B.C. Liberals' stonewall on Mount Polley

### Government, company hide behind investigations on tailings dam collapse

By Vaughn Palmer, Vancouver Sun columnist September 29, 2014



*An excavator atop the Mount Polley tailings dam is dwarfed by the massive structure in this aerial perspective. The B.C. government is refusing to release inspection reports into the Aug. 4 collapse, which drained 24 million cubic metres of tailings and water into nearby creeks and lakes.*

*Photograph by: JONATHAN HAYWARD , THE CANADIAN PRESS*

**VICTORIA —** As reporter Gordon Hoekstra tells it, he was marking time for a flight out of Williams Lake earlier this month and he decided to see what the regional library had on file about the troubled Mount Polley mine.

Inspection reports, he knew, were often filed at local libraries. Routine disclosure, public scrutiny; that sort of thing.

Sure enough, on checking the stacks at the Cariboo Regional District Library, he found a trove of inspection reports on the Imperial Metals gold and copper mine northeast of Williams Lake.

However, there was a glitch. An appendix to the 2010 report, covering the inspection of the tailings dam — the one whose collapse on B.C. Day this year flushed 24 million cubic metres of water and tailings downstream — was contained on a CD-ROM.

Last year's technology and not something he could read on his up-to-date laptop. Could the library staff help? They could. An older laptop was exhumed from the back shop and Hoekstra was able to load the text onto a transportable memory stick for digesting in detail when he got home to Vancouver.

"Crack in Mount Polley mine's dam found in 2010 inspection," declared the headline atop the resulting news story on the front page of The Vancouver Sun Friday.

The offending 10- to 15- metre tension crack was in the same earthen embankment whose fracture had led to the massive tailings spill this year. It had been discovered by a grader operator at the dam site in late summer 2010 but not reported to Knight Piesold, the mine's then-geotechnical engineering firm.

By the time the inspector got to looking it over two months later, the crack had been partly covered with dirt. "A tension crack does not necessarily indicate a plane of weakness in fill materials but it can't be ignored either," wrote Knight Piesold, atop a recommendation that a stability assessment of the tailings dam be carried out forthwith.

Nor was that the only cause for concern to emerge from the report. Forty per cent of the 92 instruments used to gauge the buildup of water pressure at the dam were broken and in need of replacement. Moreover, the replacement problem had first been identified in a safety report four years earlier.

The inspection also recorded the company's continuing problems with establishing tailings "beaches" in the storage facility behind the dam. These beaches are an essential buffer between the tailings deposited on the embankment and the water in the pond.

And so on through a finding that a buttress, meant to be constructed along the entire length of the dam, had only been completed on one side; plus a call for an updated review on the consequences for the downstream fishery if the dam were to fail, given that it was older and higher than anticipated in the initial plan.

On the latter point, Knight Piesold knew whereof it spoke, having designed the tailings dam in the first place. But the 2010 report was the last time the firm was retained to inspect the Mount Polley facility.

When the dam collapsed, the firm issued a public statement saying it warned the company and provincial officials that the structure was “getting large” and care needed to be taken to avoid problems.

All of which raised the question of whether the concerns identified in the report had been addressed, and if so, how and to what end.

How did they deal with the crack? Was there a full-blown assessment of the stability of the tailings dam, as recommended by the inspector? Did the company repair or replace the full stock of piezometers, the technical name for those instruments used to measure water pressure on the dam? Did they follow the advice calling for an update on the consequences of a failure of the tailings dam?

Seeking responses, Hoekstra didn't get far. Imperial Metals declined to discuss the disposition of the findings in the 2010 report, saying it would be “foolhardy” to comment, pending the outcome of a trio of ongoing investigations into the breach of the tailings dam.

The provincial government took refuge there as well. “The suggestion that government should provide comments or information that could compromise these investigations is completely irresponsible,” said the statement attributed to environment minister Mary Polak.

“We are in the midst of an incredibly important independent inquiry,” Premier Christy Clark told host Michael Eckford on radio station CKNW Friday. “We are sparing no one in looking at that, in making sure we understand ... and the contents of that article today in The Sun have been in the hands of the folks that are investigating this for a while.”

As well as asking what was done with the 2010 recommendations, the reporter also pressed the government to release inspection reports on the tailings dam for the years 2011-2013 as those were not on file at the library in Williams Lake.

The Liberals nixed the request — never mind that those reports should be as much a part of the public record as the one from 2010.

Given all the doubts raised about the mining sector by the Mount Polley disaster, you'd think the Liberals would be scrambling to document their performance as independent regulator, rather than joining the company in hiding behind a stone wall of convenience.

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