

## Wrangell remembers tailings breach

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Dan Rudy/ Wrangell Sentinel

More than 90 marchers bear signs and show support for the Stikine River in Wrangell during a rally Sunday, which marked the first anniversary of a tailings dam failure at the Mount Polley mine in British Columbia. On Aug. 4, 2014, the containment wall ruptured and released 13.8 million cubic yards of metals-tainted water into the nearby Fraser River system, disrupting fishing there for two seasons.

As several major mining projects continue to develop upstream of the Stikine River, Wrangell's Native community formally observed the first anniversary of the tailings dam failure at Mount Polley mine on Sunday afternoon.

A water blessing ceremony was held outside of the Chief Shakes Island tribal house, with those in attendance including members of the Tlingit and Haida tribes, a delegation of First Nations activists from Canada, and other concerned community members.

The visitors included Melanie Brown of Salmon Beyond Borders, Jacinda Mack and Oscar Dennis. Mack is Xatsull First Nation member, who was first drawn to the issue of transboundary mining after experiencing the Mount Polley breach firsthand.

On Aug. 4, 2014, a rupture in the tailings dam servicing the British Columbia copper and gold mine released billions of gallons of metals-tainted effluent into waters feeding into the salmon-rich Fraser River system.

"This is the very heart of our territory. For it to happen there, it couldn't have happened anywhere more significant," Mack said.

Despite government inspectors giving a passing grade to drinking water shortly after the breach and months of containment, Mack explained locals have not been eating fish from the river since.

"Last year was the first year we didn't fish," she said. Salmon is integral to the diet of people living along British Columbia's western rivers, and the decision to forgo them for two seasons was not reached easily. Mack explained it was ultimately based on both safety and conservation concerns.

"I come here as a community member to share our experience," she said. "It would break my heart to see what happened in that territory happen here."

A member of the Tahltan Nation, Dennis explained he has spent the past decade engaged in activist work at the headwaters of the Stikine River. He said during that time they have scored two major successes in preserving the area, blocking large-scale developments by Royal Dutch Shell and Fortune Minerals.

In 2012 Shell withdrew from plans to conduct hydraulic fracturing operations for natural gas in the Klappan Valley area, also known as the Sacred Headwaters. The area is the point of origin for the Stikine, Nass and Skeena rivers, which are also important sources of salmon.

Shell's plan was to see the construction of 4,000 wells over a 1,500 square mile area, along with supporting infrastructure. After a lengthy protest by the Tahltan that included blockades of roads and other preventive actions, the provincial government issued a permanent moratorium on petroleum extraction in the area and credited back \$18 million in oil credits to the oil firm as recompense.

A major anthracite extraction project at Mount Klappan pursued by Fortune Minerals also met resistance from Tahltan residents, who blockaded roads and occupied exploratory camp sites in protest. After several years, in May the development was suspended by British Columbia for a ten-year period while the province negotiates a management plan. Like Shell, Fortune was compensated for its initial investment.

Other mining projects along transboundary waters continue, with Red Chris being the latest to start production. The sixth major B.C. mine to have started production since 2011 and a mere eleven miles from the Stikine River's headwaters, the open-pit copper and gold mine has caused considerable concern for those downstream, particularly those in Alaska.

The mine began limited operations in February, receiving its final permitting in June. The Red Chris employs 350 workers, and is anticipated to produce copper and gold at a milling rate of more than 33,000 tons per day over three decades.

Operated by Imperial Metals, the mine is expected to produce several hundred million tons of acid-generating waste rock, which will be submerged and retained in nearby Black Lake. Fishing groups fear drainage of this into the Iskut River, a tributary of the Stikine, will harm its salmon, threatening the region's second-most productive river system.

Salmon is a billion-dollar industry in Southeast Alaska, and is also a major facet of life for the people who live there, including those who depend upon the fish for subsistence.

Organized by Wrangell Cooperative Association, Sunday's ceremony had been preceded by a march through town, with nearly 100 people bearing signs supportive of a clean Stikine walking along Front Street to Chief Shakes Island.

"We're hoping that this will kick off other water ceremonies," said Brown, an organizer with Salmon Beyond Borders. The Juneau-based group has been raising awareness among Southeast Alaskans about Canadian mining projects' potential to adversely affect shared waters such as the Stikine.

Five mines in particular are the focus of the group's endeavors, including Red Chris and Tulsequah Chief on the Taku River. Tulsequah is at an advanced stage of development that covers two previously-developed mines. In light of this, residents along the Taku held a water blessing ceremony of their own on Sunday at Juneau's Sandy Beach.

"We understand why Alaska has concerns," Mack said. "It's not to be negative, it's not to be taking shots. It's smart to be concerned."

Following the Mount Polley breach, Dennis said it became easier for the Tahltan to negotiate with Imperial Metals, and obtain a third-party review of the mine.

"We forced a third-party review of the tailings pond, because it was the same design," he said.

Despite the review finding there were higher risks with Red Chris' design than at Mount Polley, the mine received its permitting without trouble. Further, recommendations outlined in the report have largely been disregarded.

"People's concerns are really going unanswered. It's pretty frustrating," Mack admitted.

After the ceremony and a presentation inside the Chief Shakes house, participants returned to the new WCA Cultural Center for a salmon potluck. WCA tribal administrator Aaron Angerman said he was pleased with the event's turnout, and was hopeful the message got through.

"It's a start. I want to say that the whole goal is to light a fire under some people to educate themselves," he said.

"Mount Polley is a glaring example of what can go wrong. It's too big a deal for everyone not to be involved."