



By Dan Rudy

Wrangell issues letter regarding B.C. Mines

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The City and Borough of Wrangell issued a letter last week to Alaska senators Mark Begich and Lisa Murkowski, and Rep. Don Young. Drafted with the assistance of Sebastian O’Kelly, a Washington D.C.-based consultant, it expresses concern about a number of sizable mining developments upstream of the Stikine River in neighboring British Columbia, Canada.

The idea of a letter had been discussed in the previous two Borough Assembly meetings, arranged by Borough Manager Jeff Jabusch and discussed and tweaked by members of the Assembly.

Signed by Mayor David Jack, the letter states: “The City and Borough are not opposed to mining per se, but want to make sure mines proposed for development in British Columbia are done so with transparency” and “full environmental review,” and to “allow Southeast Alaska fishing communities to have some input into the process.”

Regarding the Canadian province’s record of environmental oversight, the letter cites the Aug. 4 tailings pond breach at Mount Polley mine as a confidence-shaker. Thirty-one million cubic yards of water and mine tailings were reportedly released into surrounding water systems, impacting the local trout and salmon spawning areas.

The letter continues: “The Stikine River supports healthy runs of all five Pacific Salmon species and is their major spawning ground in our part of the State. Salmon fishing has grown in importance to our community in recent years, with expanded and modernized investment by our local seafood processing plants and increased landings by our fishermen.

A major spill or breach by one of these prospective mines into the Stikine would threaten the livelihoods of many in our community who depend on salmon fishing for their incomes as well as for subsistence.”

It closes by citing the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 between the two countries, urging the state’s Congressional delegation to trigger a review of the International Joint Commission tasked with implementing the treaty’s terms.

“Otherwise,” it concludes, “we have no say over the management of an activity in another country that could have a harmful impact on our community if it is not done carefully with proper oversight.”

Since the Mount Polley breach, the issue of Canadian mining development along water systems shared with Alaska has taken particular urgency as the Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell (KSM) Mine in British Columbia nears approval this year.

Seabridge Gold, the Toronto-based mining exploration company which owns the mine, reckons it among the largest undeveloped gold projects in the world, with proved or provable reserves of 38.2 million ounces of gold and 9.9 billion pounds of copper.

One cause for concern among KSM’s critics is its sheer scale: Expected to last for 52 years, the mine will produce, on average, 130,000 tons of ore a day. Three large open pit mines are planned at the site, with a 540-foot earthen containment dam for waste water and a pair of tailings dams each over 700 feet tall. As part of its permitting, the mine will also have to treat over 100,000 gallons of water per minute before returning it to the Unuk River system.

In addition to KSM, a series of open pit mines are being built or planned along the Stikine, Taku and Unuk watersheds, which may pose significant ecological concerns to the region. These include Schaft Creek, Red Chris, Galore Creek and the operational Tulsequah Chief mine.

<http://www.wrangellsentinel.com/story/2014/10/02/news/wrangell-issues-letter-regarding-bc-mines/2515.html>