

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau Delegation
Senator Dennis Egan
Representative Beth Kerttula
Representative Cathy Muñoz



Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, Alaska
99801

Juneau legislators create Taku River Fact-Finding Task Force

Prospective members asked to submit names by September 26, 2011

For immediate release

September 19, 2011

Juneau, Alaska – Juneau’s legislative delegation is asking members of the public to serve on a Taku River Fact-Finding Task Force it is creating in response to concerns about possible impacts to salmon and other fish if industrial barge traffic increases due to development of the Tulsequah Chief Mine in British Columbia.

Chieftain Metals, Inc. is working to re-open the old mine 40 miles northeast of Juneau which produced gold, silver, copper, zinc, and lead from 1951 to 1957. The Toronto-based company hopes to have year-round access to the site by a road from Atlin, B.C., according to a presentation it prepared last month. It plans for mining production to start in the last half of 2014.

The Province of British Columbia signed an agreement in July with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation that calls the Taku River the preferred route for industrial access to the Tulsequah Valley. Last June, Chieftain Metals barged heavy equipment and materials up the Taku River to build an interim water treatment plant at the Tulsequah Chief Mine.

“I support mining,” Juneau Senator Dennis Egan (D-Juneau) said, “but I want to be sure that activities associated with it don’t hurt the fishing industry and other users who rely on the Taku River for their livelihoods and ways of life.”

The goals of the task force are three-fold:

1. To review biological health and status regarding Taku River fish stocks, habitat, and game resources.
2. To investigate who is responsible (e.g., Alaska departments of Fish and Game, Natural Resources, Environmental Conservation, and the U.S. Coast Guard) for monitoring industrial vessel traffic on the river and determine if industrial vessel safety and spill response requirements are appropriately met.
3. To assess current state and federal statutes and regulations and their effectiveness.

Impetus for the task force came from Juneau residents.

“We heard from many constituents, urging us to protect salmon habitat,” said Rep. Beth Kerttula (D-Juneau). “The Taku River is unique among large Alaska rivers in that salmon spawn and rear in it, and not just the tributaries that feed into it. We want to be sure nothing is done to disturb those gravel beds and rearing areas.”

“The river provides some of the most important salmon habitat in Alaska, directly supporting more than 400 commercial fishing-related jobs, along with sport and personal-use harvests,” Egan said. “All five species of salmon spawn in the river along with eulachon.”

The commercial, wholesale value of Taku River salmon caught in Alaska waters has ranged from \$2 million to \$7.4 million a year since 1994, according to a 2004 report by the McDowell Group. The ten-year average value is roughly \$3.4 million, the Juneau-based research firm found.

The task force will be made up of eight people:

1. A representative of an Alaska Native organization with ties to the Taku River.
2. An owner of private recreational property in the Taku River valley.
3. An owner of commercial recreational property in the Taku River valley.
4. A Southeast Alaska salmon commercial fishing permit holder.
5. A commercial fish processor dependent on Taku River fish.
6. A holder of a valid charter fishing vessel license or a licensed sport fishing guide in the Juneau area.
7. A sport fisherman.
8. A non-governmental biologist.

“The task force will outline basic facts about the Taku River such as which state and federal agencies are responsible for monitoring water quality, transportation safety, and biological health of salmon and other fish stocks,” said Rep. Cathy Muñoz (R-Juneau). “What do we know in regards to these jurisdictional questions and what do we need to know?”

The task force will submit a final report to the Juneau legislative delegation by December 15, 2011.

The Juneau delegation is asking for names of people to serve on the panel. Anyone interested in doing so is asked to call 465-4712 by 5:00 p.m., Monday, September 26, 2011.

Meetings will start in early October at a location, dates, and times to be announced.

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For more information, contact:

- Sen. Dennis Egan, 465-4947
- Rep. Beth Kerttula, 465-4766
- Rep. Cathy Muñoz, 465-3744

Attachment: Taku River Fact-Finding Task Force plan.

Juneau Legislative Delegation Taku River Fact-Finding Task Force

19 September 2011

Goals

1. Review biological health and status regarding Taku River fish stocks, habitat, and game resources.
2. Investigate who is responsible (e.g., Alaska departments of Fish and Game, Natural Resources, Environmental Conservation, and the U.S. Coast Guard) for monitoring industrial vessel traffic on the river and determine if industrial vessel safety and spill response requirements are appropriately met.
3. Assess current state and federal statutes and regulations and their effectiveness.

Membership

1. A representative of an Alaska Native organization with ties to the Taku River.
 2. An owner of private recreational property in the Taku River valley.
 3. An owner of commercial recreational property in the Taku River valley.
 4. A Southeast Alaska salmon commercial fishing permit holder.
 5. A commercial fish processor dependent on Taku River fish.
 6. A holder of a valid charter fishing vessel license or a licensed sport fishing guide in the Juneau area.
 7. A sport fisherman.
 8. A non-governmental biologist.
- To the extent possible, each member may not belong to other groups represented on the task force.
 - Members of the Juneau legislative delegation, through consensus, shall name each member.
 - The task force shall submit a final report to the Juneau legislative delegation on facts and any questions that remain by December 15, 2011.

Format

1. Meetings may last roughly three hours, with approximately two to focus on a topic or topics and one for public testimony on the same topic or topics, with time limits on testimony, if necessary.
2. Members of the public are encouraged to submit written testimony, in addition to oral comments, in order to have that entered into the record or a report.
3. During the public-comment period, members of the public may use their allotted time to ask questions of task force members or those who are invited to present information.
4. Five members of the task force constitute a quorum.

Meeting Schedule

Meeting 1

- Set goals, schedule, rules of order, scope, sideboards and parameters of discussion. This should largely be discussed and agreed upon ahead of time. The focus of the task force is on the waters of the Taku River, from bank to bank – not private or federal lands.
- Overview of existing local, state, and federal legal and regulatory protections and regulatory protections on the Canadian side.

Meeting 2

- Review values and uses of the Taku River, including reports of economic estimates.
- Summarize unique characteristics of the river.
- Review data on fish runs and spawning and rearing habitat.

Meeting 3

- Overview of regulatory gaps, if they exist.
- Overview of possible threats to Taku River fish habitat.

Meeting 4

- Open date.

Meeting 5

- Discuss what will be in the final report, which is due by December 15.

Other

- An independent facilitator shall run the meetings and write the final report.
- Meetings shall be recorded and audio recordings will be available for public review, as well as any written action minutes or material presented to the task force.
- Invited guests shall include: officials from the departments of Fish and Game, Natural Resources, Environmental Conservation, the U.S. Coast Guard; Canadian officials; First Nations representatives; and, biologists, hydrologists, other public officials, and non-public agency experts.