

TRANSBOUNDARY WATERSHED CONSERVATION BRIEFING

Industrial Barging on the Taku River Likely to Continue for Years

Fall 2011

Introduction and Summary

Chieftain Metals is currently negotiating with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation (TRTFN) for road access to the proposed Tulsequah Chief and Big Bull mines, located near the confluence of the Taku and Tulsequah rivers. However, the recently signed Land Use Plan (LUP) agreement between the TRTFN and the government of British Columbia (BC) expresses a strong preference for access via river barging.¹ Although Chieftain is focusing on a proposed 100 mile access road through TRTFN territory to the mines, Chieftain plans to rely on barging up the Taku River to support construction activities for two to three years prior to the road being ready.² But there is clear evidence barging will continue for much longer than that. The limited barging conducted by Redfern, the bankrupted previous owner of these mines, in 2007 and 2008 demonstrated that industrial barging poses clear risks of accidents, spills, groundings and damage to salmon habitat.

Taku River Industrial Barging Will Continue for Years

Chieftain plans to begin major construction in 2012 and will rely on barging to support these activities through at least mid-2014. The road is optimistically proposed to be ready in the second quarter of 2014.³

Chieftain has not obtained the Special Use Permit for road construction that is still held by Redfern, nor has Chieftain obtained any funding for road construction. The TRTFN has not yet approved any road route. A number of road routes are under discussion.⁴ These routes are different enough from the route BC approved in the 1999 Special Use Permit obtained by Redfern that a new or amended permit will likely be required, along with some level of environmental review.⁵ Thus, it is optimistic for Chieftain to expect the road to be finished in 2014. Given the uncertainties about the access road, the company is likely to be barging for additional seasons well beyond 2014.



Chieftain Metals barging equipment up the Taku river to the Tulsequah mine site in June 2011. Photo courtesy of Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

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A “Yukon News” story from January 26, 2011 stated that in addition to the road, another “option is also being mulled by Chieftain Metals. It’s the old-fashioned route, used by miners in the 1950s: barge metal out for five months over the summer, then let it pile up during the winter months.”⁶ Under this scenario, seasonal barging traffic would be heavy.

According to Atlin residents who recently met with CEO Victor Wyprysky, Chieftain thinks some level of supply barging will be necessary even when the access road has been completed and is open. Thus, it is likely that industrial river barging on the Taku will occur for the next 12 years or more.

Taku River Tlingit and Land Use Plan Prefers Barging Over Access Road

The recent LUP agreement between the TRTFN and BC government expresses a clear preference for river barging to access the Tulsequah Valley. If this is not practical, then the LUP agreement sets up an extensive consultative process to review any proposals for road access. The TRTFN have asked Chieftain to prepare a report on the barging option and will make no decisions on the road until that report is reviewed.



“To the Tulsequah Valley, the preferred access is by barge via the Taku River. If access via the Taku River is impracticable, industrial access from Atlin may be considered via a single strategic access route... Decisions related to this single strategic access route will be determined consistent with the Government-to-Government *Land and Resource Management and Shared Decision Making Agreement*.”⁷

“Due to its significant cultural and ecological values, any new applications for proposed roads and industrial access, or changes to access into this watershed will require careful consideration of the land use plan objectives and the deepest level of engagement consistent with the Government-to-Government *Land and Resource Management and Shared Decision Making Agreement*.”⁸



Tug tips over on the Taku River in July 2008.

The LUP covers industrial development generally in the region, not just the Tulsequah Chief mine. The preference for barging access to the Tulsequah River valley would apply to any future development. Therefore, the issue of the suitability of the Taku River for industrial scale barging operations goes beyond the current plans of Chieftain Metals. Alaska can expect that our neighbors in BC will continue to view the Taku River as an important transportation corridor for industrial development into the future.

Chieftain Facing December 2012 Deadline

The Project Approval Certificate issued to Redfern by the BC Environmental Assessment Office in December 2002 expired in 2007, but Redfern obtained a one-time extension through the end of 2012. Under the BC *Environmental Assessment Act*, proponents are allowed one extension for a maximum of 5 years. Therefore, Chieftain must “substantially start the Project” by the end of 2012 or face possible loss of this vital permit.⁹ According to the original Certificate issued in 2002, “This Certificate may be subject to cancellation, suspension in whole or in part [if]...construction of the Project is not, in the reasonable opinion of the Minister, substantially started within five years of the date of issue of this Certificate.”¹⁰

Chieftain is under significant pressure to complete substantial construction by the end of 2012 which likely means it will need to initiate extensive barging, far more than that done by Redfern in 2007 and 2008, between now and at least 2014. The company cannot wait for the proposed access road.

Barging Could Extend to Other Mines

Chieftain has stated its intent to develop the nearby Big Bull mine¹¹, but does not have permits for this mine. Canarc owns the New Polaris mine across the river from the Tulsequah Chief. The area near these mines and many parts of the Tulsequah Valley have been heavily staked for mineral exploration. Thus, it is certainly conceivable that river barging up the Taku River would continue to be used as access to construct and/or operate additional mines in the area.

Endnotes

- 1 Atlin Taku Land Use Plan, p. 18. <http://www.ilmb.gov.bc.ca/sites/default/files/resources/public/PDF/SRMP/ATLIN-TAKU-LUP.pdf>
- 2 www.chieftainmetals.com/press-releases/2011-june-14-chieftain-completes-tulsequah-pea.pdf
- 3 www.chieftainmetals.com/press-releases/2011-june-14-chieftain-completes-tulsequah-pea.pdf
- 4 Map of road route options, Chieftain Metals Corporate Presentation, October 26, 2011, p. 21. <http://www.chieftainmetals.com/chieftain-metals-corporate-presentation-oct-26-2011.pdf>
- 5 Redfern Special Use Permit S23154, BC Ministry of Forests, May 21, 1999, p. 2.
- 6 Yukon News article, A Fresh Start for Tulsequah Chief, January 26, 2011. <http://www.yukon-news.com/business/21438/>
- 7 Atlin Taku Land Use Plan, p. 18.
- 8 Atlin Taku Land Use Plan, p. 16.
- 9 Amendment #1 to Tulsequah Chief Mine Project BC Environmental Assessment Certificate number Mo2-01. http://a100.gov.bc.ca/appsdata/epic/documents/p72/1190656566296_39955331c1e242308bfed1a737df3doo.pdf
- 10 BC Environmental Assessment Project Approval Certificate Mo2-01 for the Tulsequah Chief Mine Project, December 2002, page 9. http://a100.gov.bc.ca/appsdata/epic/documents/p72/1069093215465_8c9c07a0449e4165b95fcc397ecdbf6f.pdf
- 11 <http://www.chieftainmetals.com/press-releases/2011-june-14-chieftain-completes-tulsequah-pea.pdf>