

TRANSBOUNDARY WATERSHED CONSERVATION BRIEFING

Watersheds of Southeast Alaska Under Threat

October 2011

The Stikine, Iskut, and Unuk River watersheds of southeast Alaska and northwest British Columbia are spectacularly diverse and largely intact. These transboundary watersheds support robust populations of Pacific salmon which feed families and sustain fisheries on both sides of the border. From headwaters to estuaries, the watersheds provide critical habitat for the fish, wildlife, and marine life that make this region famous.

The transboundary watersheds are under threat. In British Columbia (B.C.), a multitude of industrial projects are planned or proposed for the area. The Northwest Transmission Line (NTL) – a 287 kV industrial transmission line extending 215 miles into the region – has received environmental approvals. Characterized by proponents as a “gateway to a completely transformed region over time,” the NTL is a government-subsidized venture that’s being constructed to power massive mining and hydroelectric developments.

Alaskan waters and fish could be impacted by nearly a dozen large mining projects, plus roads and associated development, planned in northwest B.C. There are also numerous advanced exploration projects underway. One of the proposed mines, the massive open-pit Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell (KSM), is among the largest undeveloped gold-copper deposits in the world. KSM threatens salmon habitat on the Unuk River, only 20 miles upstream from the Alaska border and Misty Fiords National Monument Wilderness. Other giant mines are proposed for the Iskut and Stikine river drainages. As a whole, the mine proposals can be seen as a single ambitious scheme to develop the transboundary watersheds into an industrial mining zone.

As with the proposed Pebble Mine at Bristol Bay, the mines proposed for the transboundary watersheds threaten salmon and salmon habitat. Salmon are very sensitive to the unintended but not uncommon consequences of mining, notably seepage into rivers of heavy metals such as lead and mercury, and toxic chemicals such as cyanide. Mine waste would also contain naturally occurring sulfide, which becomes acidic when exposed to oxygen and water – a big problem for aquatic life. Given that the region is extremely wet and steep with high seismic activity, the danger of a spill from a toxic tailings impoundment or a tailings dam failure is very real. Clean up could be difficult if not impossible. Consequences could be catastrophic.



The wetlands of the lower Iskut River. Photo by Jim Bourquin.

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Among the mining projects that have received or are in the process of applying for an Environmental Assessment (EA) Certificate in British Columbia are the following:

Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell (KSM)

- KSM is wholly owned by Seabridge Gold, which is applying for an EA certificate for the mine. Seabridge Gold's corporate strategy is to obtain certificates and permits for the proposed mine, then sell the KSM project to a bigger mining company.
- The proposed gold-copper mine is located on Sulphurets Creek, a tributary of the fish-bearing Unuk River, which flows into Misty Fiords National Monument.
- The mine plan calls for the construction of four giant open pits. 120,000 tons of rock would be extracted per day, over a mine life of 52 years, generating 2.1 billion tons of waste rock.
- The estimated cost of mine construction is \$4.7 billion.

Galore Creek

- The Galore Creek mine project is owned 50-50 by NovaGold Resources and Teck Resources, and managed by the Galore Creek Mining Corporation. The proposed gold-copper mine has received an EA certificate.
- The proposed mine is located at Galore Creek, which flows into the Scud River, a salmon-bearing tributary of the Stikine River. 90,000 tons of rock per day would be excavated over a 20 year mine life. Tailings waste would be submerged in Round Lake, which drains into the Iskut River. The cost of mine construction is estimated at \$5.2 billion.

Shaft Creek

- Shaft Creek is wholly owned by Copper Fox Resources. The company intends to apply for an EA certificate for the proposed mine.
- The mine project is located between Shaft Creek and Mess Creek, a tributary of the Stikine River, which supports 19 fish species and all 5 species of Pacific Salmon.
- The proposed gold-copper-molybdenum mine would excavate 150,000 tons of rock a day over a mine life of 23 years. Mining the deposit would generate enormous piles of acid-generating waste rock in an area with extremely high seasonal water flow.

Red Chris

- The proposed Red Chris mine is wholly owned by Imperial Metals. The project has received an EA certificate, and is the most advanced mine proposal in the region.
- Located on Todagin Mountain, near the headwater lakes of the Iskut River, Red Chris would process over 30,000 tons of ore per day over a mine life of 28 years.
- Tailings waste from the mine would be submerged in fish-bearing waters.

Mining companies have staked much of the unprotected land on the B.C. side of the transboundary watersheds. Along with the four noted mine proposals, there are numerous additional projects in the advanced exploration stage. There is also a significant amount of energy development in the region, including a 265 megawatt river diversion hydroelectric project on the Iskut River, currently under construction by AltaGas, and a highly controversial proposal by Royal Dutch Shell to develop coal bed methane at the headwaters of the Stikine River.

The B.C. government claims the provincial environmental assessment process will safeguard the fish, wildlife and ecological integrity of the transboundary watersheds. Yet in July 2011, the B.C. Auditor General reported that for existing developments, “the Environmental Assessment Office cannot assure British Columbians that planned mitigation efforts are having the intended effects because adequate monitoring is not occurring and follow-up evaluations are not being conducted.” The B.C. government cannot assure its own citizens that development in the transboundary watersheds will be safe. Downstream Alaskan interests will undoubtedly receive even less consideration.

Alaskans are being offered a deal. B.C. gets jobs and tax revenue, while Alaska gets the risk of polluted waters, diminished salmon runs, less wild animals, and less marine life. Fortunately, it’s not yet a done deal. Alaskans can voice their concerns to their local representatives, the Governor, and the State Department to push B.C. to guarantee the health of Alaskan waters. Before further development proceeds, B.C. needs to engage in a meaningful cumulative impacts assessment, and establish a formal mechanism to incorporate downstream U.S. concerns about potential Canadian development projects into review processes. The transboundary watersheds are international treasures, and an international voice is needed to ensure that their rich ecological values are safeguarded.

For more information

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Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell project assessment

http://a100.gov.bc.ca/appsdata/epic/html/deploy/epic_project_home_322.html

Galore Creek project assessment

http://a100.gov.bc.ca/appsdata/epic/html/deploy/epic_project_home_239.html

Schaft Creek project assessment

http://a100.gov.bc.ca/appsdata/epic/html/deploy/epic_project_home_283.html

Red Chris project assessment

http://a100.gov.bc.ca/appsdata/epic/html/deploy/epic_project_home_19.html

BC Hydro Northwest Transmission Line Project Map

