

Delegation asks Kerry for transboundary review

By: Elwood Brehmer (/authors/elwood-brehmer),

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Alaska's congressional delegation responded Thursday to continued concerns from Southeast Alaskans about Canadian mine plans by asking Secretary of State John Kerry to look into whether environmental practices across the border are worthy of attention under a bilateral treaty.

Rep. Don Young and Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan sent a letter to Kerry May 12 (<http://www.alaskajournal.com/Alaska%20Delegation%20letter%20to%20Kerry#.VzUdt9c67e4>) requesting the State Department to question Canadian officials about the impact active and proposed hard rock mines in British Columbia and the Yukon could have on salmon in several large "transboundary" rivers.

"Like most Alaskans, we strongly support responsible mining, including mines in Southeast Alaska, but Alaskans need to have every confidence that mining activity in Canada is carried out just as safely as it is in our state," the delegation wrote. "Yet, today, that confidence does not exist. Proposed mining development in the Stikine, Taku River, and Unuk watersheds has raised concerns among commercial and recreational fishermen, tourism interests, and Alaska Native communities regarding water quality maintenance of the transboundary rivers that flow by their homes and onto their fishing grounds."

The letter references seven active or planned mines just on the British Columbia side of the border from Southeast Alaska. It specifically notes that the long-closed underground Tulsequah Chief metal mine in the Taku drainage northeast of Juneau has been leaking acidic wastewater into the river for many years.

Late last year, Canadian government officials finalized efforts to reduce the leakage but did not require the mine's water treatment facility be restarted. There have also been proposals to reopen the Tulsequah Chief project.

In November, Gov. Bill Walker and British Columbia Premier Christy Clark signed a non-binding memorandum of understanding (<http://www.alaskajournal.com/2015-12-02/alaska-british-columbia-sign-transboundary-mou#.VzT4Ptc67e4>), or MOU, to establish a Bilateral Working Group on the Protection of Transboundary Waters. The Alaska side of the group, tasked with facilitating an exchange of best practices, marine safety and joint visitor industry promotion among other things, is led by Lt. Gov. Byron Mallott.

The delegation did not go as far as to ask for action by the International Joint Commission, or IJC, which was established in 1909 to resolve disputes over how actions in one country could impact watersheds shared by both. It did, however, urge Kerry to "utilize all measures at your disposal to address this issue at the international level" and decide if the "IJC is a suitable venue to determine whether Canadian mines are following 'best practices'" for wastewater and mine tailings treatment.

Additionally, it asked for a more formal consultation process with state agencies, tribes and Alaska Native corporations during Canadian mine permit reviews.

While numerous Alaska environmental, commercial fishing and Alaska Native groups have called IJC involvement, the commission can only be spurred by a formal call from either the State Department or Canada's Global Affairs Department.

Those groups lauded the delegation in formal statements reacting to the letter.

"This powerful statement underscores that Alaskans, regardless of political party, want Secretary Kerry to address (British Columbia) mining with Canadian officials so that clean water and healthy salmon runs will support our economy for generations to come," Salmon Beyond Borders director Heather Hardcastle said.

Also highlighted in the letter is a British Columbia Auditor General report released earlier this month that is highly critical of the province's oversight of mining activity.

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British Columbia Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett has said in interviews with the Journal and the Juneau Empire (<http://www.alaskajournal.com/business-and-finance/2015-08-26/bc-minister-talks-transboundary-mine-issues-cleanup#.VzT4M9c67e4>) that the issues are not with the province's environmental regulations and enforcement, but rather with better communicating with Alaskans (<http://www.alaskajournal.com/business-and-finance/2014-11-12/alaska-bc-cooperate-quietly-transboundary-issues#.VzUdFdc67e4>) how thoroughly British Columbia monitors its mines.

The province has taken significant heat for the Mount Polley mine tailings dam failure in 2014, which a government investigation concluded was caused by design flaws.

Elwood Brehmer can be reached at elwood.brehmer@alaskajournal.com (<mailto:elwood.brehmer@alaskajournal.com>).

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