

# The Yukon News

## **B.C. developing remediation plan for Tulsequah Chief mine**

Pierre Chauvin Friday December 23, 2016

The B.C. government is making good on its pledge to take responsibility for an abandoned mine that has been leaking acidic water into nearby rivers for the past 50 years. After an inspection last September at the Tulsequah Chief mine south of Atlin, the province started developing a remediation plan, B.C. Energy and Mines Minister Bill Bennett told the News on Tuesday.

“I’ve ordered a closure and remediation plan to be done with the proceeds we have in trust from the bankrupt company,” Bennett said.

The mine was never properly shut down after several years of mining in the 1950s, resulting in acid mine drainage — acidic water and metals — flowing out of the mine. Two mining companies tried successively to restart production but both went bankrupt, the latest being Chieftain Metals Inc. last September. While the remediation plan is being developed, Bennett said the province has to wait to see what the creditors that still have legal rights to the mine will do.

“We can’t just suddenly get rid of their legal rights without due process,” Bennett said. “I’m prepared to close and remediate that site if no other company comes in and accepts the responsibility.”

The September inspection reports found that the camp near the mine was left for the most part unsecured. “Theft and vandalism is a potential concern given the site is relatively accessible and there is no caretaker on site,” the report reads.

Inspectors also found exposed chemicals at the abandoned water treatment plant. As part of its water licence Chieftain Metals had to treat water flowing out of the mine before releasing it, which it did for six months in 2012 before shutting down citing higher than anticipated costs.

“The risk those chemicals could have leaked or gotten into the natural environment has been eliminated,” Bennett said.

The exfiltration pond, which used a filter cloth to capture sludge, isn’t working anymore: the filter is likely clogged, with water flowing out of the pond into the river.

“There is significant concern that the pond is not being properly managed and may pose a risk if not immediately mitigated,” the report reads.

Alaska environmentalists including Rivers Without Borders (RWB) have been calling on B.C. for years to remediate and close the mine.

Bennett acknowledged it was a “bad situation” that both B.C. and Alaska inherited because the mine was built before any remediation legislation was put in place. But he took issue with claims the mine was contaminating the Taku and Tulsequah rivers. “We’ve been testing the water for at least 10 years,” he said. “The river or the fish are not suffering environmental damage in the meantime.” The water that comes out of the mine is highly toxic, according to the inspection report.

But because of its relatively small volume, it's not harming the fish or the river, Bennett said. "The amount of water in the Tulsequah and Taku river(s) is so large it's immediately diluted and there is no trace of it," he said.

But Chris Zimmer, RWB's Alaska campaign director, said Bennett can't back up his claims. "While we're not claiming it's been a major serious killer of fish, there is no way the minister has evidence to say it's not affecting the river," he said. "Just because we don't see a whole bunch of dead fish belly up floating down the river doesn't mean this discharge isn't harming the fish population in the river."

Leaving the acidic water flowing out of the mine isn't not a long-term solution, Bennet said. "If we take that step (of closing it) we'll make sure that it's done properly and that you have something that lasts forever."

An assessment of the risks to water and fish that Chieftain Metals was supposed to do before it went bankrupt will be done next spring and summer. "The findings from the study will determine whether or to what extent mine effluent may be impacting the environment and provide a foundation for next steps," according to the B.C. environment ministry website.

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