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B.C. COMMITMENTS TO CLEAN UP TULSEQUAH CHIEF MINE IN DOUBT
Statements from B.C. Minister and Mining Industry Official Stir Broad Concerns in Alaska
Alaska House Fisheries Committee Hearing March 16 To Investigate Transboundary Mining

(JUNEAU) Recent media statements by [B.C. Minister of Energy and Mines Bill Bennett](#) and [Gavin C. Dirom](#) of the B.C. Association for Mineral Exploration indicate previous commitments to clean up the abandoned Tulsequah Chief mine are now in doubt. These statements have also fanned the fires of larger concerns in Alaska that B.C. cannot manage its mining activities across the transboundary region in a way that will not harm downstream water quality and fisheries in Alaska.

“For two decades B.C. officials have claimed re-opening the Tulsequah Chief Mine is the best way to stop the acid mine drainage. To date we’ve witnessed two bankruptcies, [lax enforcement](#) of mining regulations, and the continuous polluting of Southeast Alaska’s most productive watershed. Given recent negotiations with the State of Alaska and promises made by Minister Bennett, fishermen believed B.C. was finally getting serious about cleaning up the mess. Instead, it appears the province’s ‘big plan’ is to continue its failed strategy of relying on yet another mining company to assume responsibility. Allowing persistent pollution to leak into the river is in direct violation of Canadian law and has long-term implications for our shared watershed and multiple user groups that rely on the Taku,” said Dale Kelley, Executive Director of the Alaska Trollers Association.

Alaskans were encouraged by [Minister Bennett’s reaction](#) to his visit to the Tulsequah Chief in August 2015, after which he pledged to fix the problem sooner rather than later. However, [he has backtracked on that commitment](#). Alaskans’ concerns were further raised by [Bennett’s quotes in a recent Juneau Empire article](#) downplaying the pollution, claiming there was “no contamination in the river” despite direct evidence to the contrary. He admitted the mine discharge “exceeds water quality standards” but said the situation was not an “emergency.” Bennett said if an upcoming Risk Assessment fails to show “environmental harm” the province will do nothing but await a new mine buyer. B.C.’s hope for a new mining company may be driven by the rumored interest in the mine by [Black Loon Metals](#).

“Instead of enforcing the law to stop illegal and highly toxic acid mine drainage into salmon habitat, Minister Bennett is trying to downplay the impacts and avoid responsibility,” said Chris Zimmer, Alaska Campaign Director for Rivers Without Borders. “[Very low levels of heavy metals in acid mine drainage can degrade](#) a salmon’s ability to smell, locate spawning grounds, find food, and detect predators, and inhibit growth, breathing and heart function. If B.C. isn’t going to enforce water quality standards then what good are the standards? Is the new standard no action will be taken unless there is an emergency? Isn’t it then too late?”

The mine has been leaking toxic acid mine drainage since it was first abandoned in 1957. This pollution violates the Canadian Fisheries Act, B.C. mine permits, an agreement with the Taku River Tlingit First Nation and possibly Article IV of the Boundary Waters Treaty. B.C. has taken little action to stop the

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pollution and instead has counted on finding a new company to re-open the mine and assume cleanup responsibilities. This has been a dismal failure as two mining companies have gone bankrupt trying to re-open the mine. The Taku River Tlingit First Nation has [long opposed an access road](#), in 2012 passed a [Joint Clan Mandate opposing the project](#) and filed several lawsuits over the project. [Strong opposition to the alternative barging access plan](#) came from Alaska, while [actual barging operations failed miserably](#).

“Re-opening the mine is not a cleanup plan; it is a recipe for another bankruptcy that will again leave a big mess. Given the [marginal economics of the mine](#), lack of First Nation support, Alaskan opposition to using the Taku River as a barging highway, the difficulties of barging, and expensive environmental liabilities, it is very possible a new company would also go bankrupt and then we’re back to where we are right now. This inaction and delay is a clear sign that B.C. and Canada are far more interested in supporting the mining industry than in enforcing laws, honoring treaties and being a responsible neighbor to Alaska,” said Cynthia Wallesz, Executive Director of the United Southeast Alaska Gillnetters

The Tulsequah Chief has become a poster child for concerns about B.C. mining in the transboundary region at a time of growing demands from Southeast Alaskans for the State of Alaska and the U.S. federal government to work together to obtain guarantees that B.C.’s mining development won’t harm downstream water quality, fisheries or livelihoods. Concerns and outrage were furthered by [Dirom’s statement in the SitNews](#), which seemed to say Alaskan concerns are based on “fear and ignorance.”

“Our concerns are based on real-world experience with B.C. such the Tulsequah Chief, the Mount Polley tailings dam disaster, a 2016 [Auditor General’s scathing review](#) of B.C.’s mine regulatory processes, a [report by the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs](#) that found significant weaknesses in B.C.’s financial assurances regime and the dismissive attitude of B.C. government and industry officials. We aren’t ignorant. But we certainly are fearful that B.C.’s mining will harm our water quality, salmon and jobs,” said Zimmer.

On March 16, the Alaska House Fisheries Committee will hold a hearing on transboundary mining and to discuss [HJR9](#), which urges the U.S. federal government “to investigate the long-term, region-wide downstream effects of proposed and existing industrial development and to develop measures to ensure that state resources are not harmed by upstream development in British Columbia.”

“If B.C. can’t ensure that the Tulsequah Chief is cleaned up why should Alaskans have any trust that much larger mines like KSM won’t pollute our waters?” asked Zimmer. “The size of the watersheds, the valuable fisheries at risk, and the growing evidence that neither B.C. nor its mining industry can be trusted clearly shows Alaska cannot go it alone with B.C. We need the State of Alaska to stand up for the Taku, and we need the U.S. federal government and the authority of the Boundary Waters Treaty to ensure upstream mining does not threaten our fisheries and water quality.”

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