British Columbia cleaning up Tulsequah Chief

By CHRIS ZIMMER

I would like to thank the Ketchikan Daily News for, in its Aug. 20 editorial, recognizing the importance of the transboundary Taku River and noting that finally, British Columbia is moving in "the right direction" toward the cleanup and closure of the abandoned and polluting Tulsequah Chief mine. Fishermen, fishing businesses, tourism operators, Native tribes, Alaska and federal leaders have been working for this for two decades.

The Tulsequah Chief is located right on the banks of the Tulsequah River, the main tributary to the Taku River, only a few miles upstream of the B.C./Alaska border, about 40 miles northeast of Juneau. It has been spewing toxic acid mine drainage laden with heavy metals into the Tulsequah River since the mine was abandoned in 1977. Two companies have gone bankrupt trying to re-develop the mine, Rodilam in 2009 and Chetlcom Metals in 2016. Little has been done to stem the toxic discharge, which is in clear violation of B.C. and Canadian federal law, water quality standards and mine permits.

But, it now does seem that B.C. realizes that the Tulsequah Chief is not a viable mine, and the best solution is for the province to take responsibility for mine cleanup and closure. The province is now taking the first steps toward this goal, but this is a done deal and continued vigilance and pressure from Alaska is vital toward ensuring B.C. follows through on its commitments.

I am occasionally asked why the Taku watershed is so important outside of Juneau, why closing down and cleaning up the Tulsequah Chief should continue to be a priority for Alaska leaders and how the long battle over this mine has lessons for other mining issues along the B.C./Alaska border. Some of these questions came up this past January during discussion of two Ketchikan Borough Assembly resolutions, and there was also comment that we should not be telling Canada what to do in its territory.

I'd like to address these questions and comment as they are directly relevant to the Tulsequah situation and to current and future mining issues in the transboundary watersheds of the Chilkat, Taku, Stikine/Iskut and Unuk river systems.

The Taku River is usually Southeast Alaska's largest overall salmon producer, with Southeast's largest run of coho and king salmon, and is a vital regional economic, cultural and recreational resource.

Even those who don't fish for Taku salmon should be concerned, since any declines of Taku salmon will move fishing pressure toward other regional fisheries. Declines in Taku salmon also could have an economic ripple effect throughout much of Southeast Alaska. The Southeast transboundary rivers are our lifeblood. A threat to salmon anywhere is a threat to salmon, and those who depend on them, everywhere.

The Alaska portion of the Taku is in excellent shape and its fisheries are well managed. But we are dependent on B.C. It also properly manages the upstream salmon habitat on its side of the border. B.C. also must honor the Boundary Waters Treaty, which prohibits the pollution of transboundary rivers, and Attachment E, Habitat and Restoration of the Pacific Salmon Treaty in which the Parties agree to maintain adequate water quality.

Given the value of the Taku to Southeast Alaska and its status as a transboundary river, Alaskans have every right to demand that B.C. conduct its activities in the watershed in a way that protects salmon habitat and does not harm our downstream fisheries.

The Tulsequah Chief was the impetus for concerns over transboundary mining. It is the poster child for problems with B.C.'s mining regulations, such as lax enforcement, inadequate bonding, and bankruptcy laws that protect polluters. These lessons are important in addressing other transboundary mining concerns. So, while we are finally moving in the right direction toward mine cleanup and closure, we need to remember how and why we got here.

Alaska leaders have pushed for cleanup for years, and most recently Senator Sullivan has pressed the Canadians to clean up the mess. Cleaning up this polluting mine is the timeliest and best opportunity to both protect an important transboundary salmon river from the effects of mining in B.C., and also set some precedents for ensuring Alaska stands up for its interests in the transboundary region.

After more than 60 years of pollution and decades of controversy, B.C. is taking steps to clean up and close down the Tulsequah Chief. But the job is not near done. Alaska leaders need to continue the pressure on B.C. and Canada that has finally had some results. Cleaning up and closing down the Tulsequah Chief should be the top priority for Alaska in the transboundary region.

Chris Zimmer is the Alaska Campaign Director for Rivers Without Borders in Juneau and has been working on ending the threat of the Tulsequah Chief to the Taku watershed since 2001.