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Boost in B.C. Mining has Alaska Fishermen Nervous

By Liz Ruskin, APRN - Washington DC | March 28, 2014 - 1:59 pm

The head of British Columbia's government has pledged to spur mining development in the western Canadian province, and that has fishermen in Southeast Alaska nervous. A group from Southeast flew to Washington D.C. this week to see how it can raise its voice in Canada.

B.C. Premier Christy Clark is making good on a promise to break ground on eight new mines and expand nine others by next year. The increased activity has already brought more than 2,000 jobs to B.C.

"Well, if there's any doubt that here in British Columbia we are in favor of mining ... I'm going to dispel that now!" she said to applause at a mining conference in January, as she announced plans to continue a \$10 million tax credit to help finance mineral exploration companies. The province has already streamlined its permitting process, cutting in half the turnaround time for one type of mining permit.

"It has made a heckuva difference in raising revenue in B.C. and we're going to keep doing it!" she said at the conference, speaking of the tax credit.

British Columbia now has more than 20 major mines and expansions moving through the permitting process. The largest, known as the KSM mine, would be about 45 miles from Hyder, Alaska. Brian Lynch of the Petersburg Vessels Owners Association says his group isn't anti-mine, but they're wary of the KSM mine and at least four other proposed projects in B.C. that are upstream from Alaskan waters.

"They're huge, probably some of the largest mines in North America, if they go forward and we just have a great deal of concern," Lynch said. "We want input because we have multi-million dollar fisheries on the U.S. side."

Lynch was part of a group of five Alaskans in Washington this week to ask for help from the State Department and the Congressional delegation. Lynch says they're concerned B.C. regulators may not be able to keep up with the new pace of mining and that water quality and fish habitat may suffer. A spokesman for Sen. Lisa Murkowski says she plans to raise the issue with Secretary of State John Kerry.

The British Columbia Ministry of Environment declined several requests for an interview this week, saying it had no one available. But in an email, the ministry said an environmental assessment of KSM is underway and a decision is expected mid-year. The Ministry says U.S. and Alaska state officials have participated in a technical working group that provides comments for that assessment.

Dale Kelley, a Craig fisherman, came to Washington on behalf of the Alaska Trollers Association. She says they haven't been very involved in the Canadian process and have no particular reason to think they'd be rebuffed.

"But they don't really have to listen to us," she said. "So I think it would be nice to have a mechanism between the countries where, whether it's our state or our federal government, can actually weigh in and have some authority for ensuring our interests are protected on the downstream side."

The two countries have an International Joint Commission to work out boundary water issues. Lynch says as he understands it, the commission can't help until a threat occurs, and by then it's too late.

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