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MINING FOR ANSWERS

Drainage from the old Tulsequah Chief Mine in northwest British Columbia sits in a containment pond next to the Tulsequah River.

MINING FOR ANSWERS

Tribal Governments and indigenous activists on both sides of the Alaska-Canada border are raising questions about a mining boom in northwest British Columbia

BY PAULA DOBBYN

PHOTOS BY CHRIS MILLER EXCEPT AS NOTED

HOLLY CHURCHILL (HAIDA) HARVESTS CEDAR, sea asparagus, and beach grass from tidal areas near her home in Ketchikan. Born into the Eagle moiety, Churchill is an accomplished weaver who specializes in Haida basketry. Her family comes from Haida Gwaii, British Columbia. Besides weaving, Churchill is playing a new role of late: environmental activist. She is speaking out, along with other concerned tribal citizens and tribal government officials, about a mining boom in northwest British Columbia, a remote corner of Canada bordering Southeast Alaska. They are questioning how mineral development upriver from their communities could affect Southeast Alaska fisheries, tourism and livelihoods.

“THE POTENTIAL FOR CONTAMINATION of our water and fish is my greatest concern. But it could also harm our sacred plants and animals,” said Churchill.

Spurred by government economic incentives and the construction of a 215-mile power line, British Columbia’s northwest region is undergoing major industrial development. The growth includes a slew of hydroelectric projects, natural gas pipelines, port expansions, road construction, and mining exploration and development.

At least a dozen large-scale mines are in various stages of planning and

permitting in northern B.C., including five located in transboundary watersheds. These nation-straddling watersheds give rise to salmon-filled rivers that flow from B.C. to Southeast Alaska, home to some 15,000 Alaskan tribal citizens. Dependence on salmon remains a dominant feature of life for Southeast tribes as it has for thousands of years.

Churchill is part of a growing chorus of Southeast Alaskans voicing concerns over the danger of Canadian mines damaging transboundary rivers. Tribal members are finding common cause with Alaska commercial and sport fishing groups, as well



as some B.C. First Nations. But it’s not just individual activists and business owners raising questions.

The Alaska Native Brotherhood and Alaska Native Sisterhood Grand Camp, the oldest indigenous advocacy organization in Alaska, and the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (Central Council), a tribal government representing more than 29,000 Tlingit and Haida Indians worldwide, have all recently issued formal letters or passed resolutions of concern regarding the B.C. mining projects and the lack of Alaska tribal voices in their planning and oversight processes.

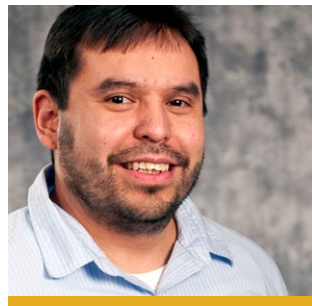
“It’s like the Wild West over there. And because it’s happening in another country, we don’t have a lot of control over it,” said Rob A. Sanderson, Jr., (Haida), second vice president of the Central Council. “They don’t even have to consult with Alaska tribes.”

RICH IN SALMON AND MINERALS

The transboundary region of Northwest B.C. and Southeast Alaska spans about 32 million acres, roughly the size of Switzerland and Portugal combined. Alpine tundra, boreal and coastal rainforests, and a marine environment of islands and estuaries define this rugged, wild place.

Keith Carlick, a member of the Taku River Tlingit First Nation and resident of Atlin, B.C., pulls a king salmon from his drift gillnet on the Taku River. Carlick and fellow Canadian fishermen fish for all five species of Pacific salmon just above the border between the U.S. and Canada. They hand-haul their 50-foot drift gillnets aboard small skiffs from May through September.

'If anything happened to these salmon stocks, it would affect us all.'



Raymond Paddock, environmental coordinator for Tlingit and Haida Central Council.

The area in question encompasses the territory of diverse indigenous Nations that lived and thrived there for a vast period of time before the 'US/Canada' border was first drawn on a map. The Tlingit and Haida Nations and their tribal members have inhabited Southeast Alaska for thousands of years. On the Canadian side, the Tsimshian, Tahltan, Taku River Tlingit, Iskut, Champagne and Aishihik, Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs and the Carcross/Tagish are among the primary First Nations.

The area is also home to major rivers with large and healthy populations of five species of Pacific salmon, the economic and cultural backbone of Southeast Alaska.

"Salmon have sustained us since time immemorial. They define who we are," said Churchill.

Thousands of fishermen harvest them commercially, for sport or to put food on the table. Salmon contribute an estimated \$1 billion to the Southeast Alaska economy every year. The U.S. Forest Service has calculated that some 90 percent of rural Southeast households use salmon with the average resident consuming about 75 pounds a year.

"If anything happened to these stocks, it would affect us all," said Raymond Paddock, environmental coordinator for Central Council.

Besides fish and wildlife, the transboundary region is also rich in minerals, and the B.C. provincial government is promoting their development. In a jobs plan released two years ago, B.C. Premier Christy Clark pledged to see eight new mines constructed and nine others expanded by 2015. In a speech to a mining conference in Vancouver in January of this year, Clark said her province is halfway there.

"There's a great opportunity there and all of the communities of northwest British Columbia will see the benefits," said Brian Downie, a city councilor from Terrace, B.C., a community near a large copper and gold project.

"It means jobs. It means ore shipped through our port," said Galinda Durrant, mayor of Stewart, B.C.

Both officials spoke to a local television station in B.C. last fall.

Canada has encouraged industrial development by providing economic incentives, relaxing environmental regulations and by subsidizing the construction of the Northwest Transmission Line, an extension of B.C.'s power grid. The line will light up many parts of the remote northwest corner of the province for the first time. In January Clark pledged to extend a \$10 million tax credit for mining exploration for another year. In the same speech, she ordered a review of B.C.'s environmental permitting process to streamline it for development.

Five of the mining projects the B.C. government is promoting are located in watersheds upstream from Southeast Alaska. Developers are trying to re-open Tulsequah Chief, a shuttered 1950s-era mine near the Taku River. Other significant transboundary mining projects include KSM, Red Chris, Schaft Creek, and Galore Creek. The rivers they could affect are the Taku, the Stikine and the Unuk.

The Taku is typically Southeast Alaska's single largest overall salmon producer. Coho and king salmon are its top species. The Stikine, near Wrangell, is Southeast's second largest salmon producer. The Unuk, close to Ketchikan, ranks as one of Southeast's top five king salmon rivers.

TULSEQUAH CHIEF: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Tribal officials and activists point to what's already happening at the Tulsequah Chief as a cautionary tale. The defunct Canadian mine has been releasing acid mine drainage into the Taku River for years.

Acid drainage occurs when sulfide-bearing ore is exposed to air and water. The substance, akin to battery acid, is often laden with heavy metals, making it unhealthy to drink and toxic to fish.

Tulsequah Chief's current owner, Chieftain Metals Inc., is attempting to raise cash to restart mining and to stop the polluted discharges.

In a 2010 letter to B.C. environmental regulators, the Douglas Indian



Acid drainage leaves one of several adits for the Tulsequah Chief Mine in British Columbia, Canada. The Tulsequah Chief Mine contains ore deposits of copper, lead, zinc, gold, and silver and operated from 1951 to 1957. The site is currently under development by Chieftain Metals Inc.

Association (DIA), the federally recognized Tribe of the Tlingit people of Douglas Island, the Taku River, and Stephens Passage shorelines, said a cleanup of the Tulsequah is long overdue. The Taku River valley is traditional territory for DIA members. Its ecology is "precious to the Tlingit" and all components must be "protected as kin," the letter states. "We must see that these living systems are protected to the highest standards."

Last May, in a formal letter to Canadian Parliament member Nathan Cullen, who represents northern B.C.,

DIA expressed grave concerns over what the long-delayed cleanup of the toxic Tulsequah Chief site might indicate for the oversight, or lack thereof, of rapidly expanding mining operations in northwest British Columbia.

"The fact that B.C. and Canadian authorities allow this violation of the federal Fisheries Act and of the British Columbia Environmental Management Act to continue unabated is a case in point that is particularly troubling. Without stronger oversight, more proposed [transboundary] mining will almost certainly result in

unnecessary destruction of fish and wildlife habitat," the letter concludes.

The Taku River Tlingit First Nation formally opposed the reopening of Tulsequah Chief in 2012. This January, the tribe sued to stop the project. That case is pending.

Southeast Alaska tribes are not categorically anti-mining, said Richard Peterson (Haida), president of the Organized Village of Kasaan, a tribal government.

Tribes look at each mine project case by case and decide whether to support it based on factors like jobs for tribal members and potential impacts on fish and water, he said.

Some Alaska Native corporations such as Juneau's Goldbelt directly benefit from mining. Goldbelt runs commuter service by land and sea for workers at the Kensington mine, 60 miles north of Juneau, according to the company website.

POWTEC, a subsidiary of the Organized Village of Kasaan and Craig Tribal Association, also benefits from mining. The company provides labor and supply services to operators of the Niblack mine, a multi-metals project located within Kasaan's customary and traditional use area.

Likewise, the Kasaan tribe supports the development of Bokan Mountain, a rare earth mineral project on the southern end of Prince of Wales Island, Peterson said.

The tribe is hosting a mining symposium in April to discuss opportunities and environmental aspects of mining in Southeast. Representatives of mining companies, federal and state agencies, tribal leaders and others are expected to attend.

Peterson noted that unlike the large-scale B.C. mines located near salmon-bearing international rivers, Niblack and Bokan are relatively small projects. And they do not threaten any significant salmon habitat.

"That's probably the number one factor. As soon as you start talking about building a big mine near our salmon streams and our water sources, you would have to work pretty hard to convince us it's a good thing," Peterson said.

PHOTO THIS PAGE COURTESY TLINGIT AND HAIDA CENTRAL COUNCIL



Elycia Carlick, a member of the Taku River Tlingit First Nation and resident of Atlin, B.C., runs her skiff on the Taku River to get to her fishing site.

BILLIONS IN TAX REVENUE FOR CANADA

The B.C. mine project that's raising the most ire in Southeast so far is known as KSM. It's a giant copper-gold-molybdenum deposit in the headwaters of the Unuk, just north of the Alaska border, near Stewart, B.C. Seabridge Gold, a junior mining company based in Vancouver, has spent the last five years seeking to turn KSM into a large open-pit mine. It hopes to obtain government permits this year.

If built, KSM would produce an average of 130,000 tons of ore daily for up to 55 years from an industrial footprint of about 6,500 acres. As currently designed, it would be one of the world's biggest gold and copper mines. The pit would be located near Sulphurets Creek, a tributary of the Unuk, and it would include a 15-mile tunnel for transporting the ore to a processing facility near the Nass River, one of B.C.'s largest salmon rivers.

According to Seabridge, the project would directly employ about 1,800 people on site, and thousands more across Canada, during the construction phase. Over the five decades the mine is projected to operate, it would generate more than 1,000 on site jobs annually and thousands more indirectly throughout Canada. KSM could generate billions of dollars in tax revenue and royalties for Canada.

KSM would also create an estimated 2 billion tons of mine waste that would require perpetual treatment and containment because of their toxicity. Two tailings dams, each bigger than the Hoover Dam, would be required to contain the waste.

Protection of the environment, including downstream waters, is a "guiding principle" behind the design of the KSM project, according to Seabridge. On its community website for KSM, the company points out the project has undergone extensive environmental and technical evaluations by independent experts over the past five years to ensure the protection of the surrounding environment.

Officials from three State of Alaska Departments – Natural Resources, Fish and Game, and Environmental Conservation – participate in a

technical working group of experts reviewing the KSM project. Kyle Moselle, large project coordinator for Department of Natural Resources, told *First Alaskans* the review process works well and he's confident Alaska resources will be protected.

"We don't have any concerns necessarily. We're satisfied with the technical review that's taking place. We're able to affect the design of the project through the working group," said Moselle.

The federal government's position is more muted. "Due to staffing shortfalls" the U.S. Interior Department was unable to comprehensively review KSM or participate in the working group, according to a November 2013 letter to Canadian environmental regulators. The federal Environmental Protection Agency has raised a number of concerns with the KSM project, related to salmon, water quality and tribal consultation.

Seabridge has repeatedly said it will comply with U.S. and Canadian water quality laws. In an open house in Smithers, B.C. last fall, Brent Murphy, Seabridge's vice president for environmental affairs, said the company is responding to community concerns.

"We've been going out listening to the communities, actually listening to the communities, soliciting their input," Murphy told reporters.

Although Seabridge held a community feedback session in Ketchikan in 2011, it did not include any community in Alaska on its most recent series of listening sessions.

In February, Murphy told Canada's *The Globe and Mail* newspaper that some First Nations support developing KSM. The Gitksan and Nisga'a bands are among them.

LACK OF TRIBAL CONSULTATION

The KSM project's proximity to the Unuk River and its premiere king salmon run is the main problem for Alaska fishermen and tribes. King, or Chinook, salmon is considered a "money fish," prized for its meat, oils, and size by commercial and sport fisherman, and is an essential part of the Native way of life.

But king runs have plummeted in recent years in many parts of Alaska, including Southeast. Regulators have responded with fishing cutbacks and closures. While the exact cause or causes of the king salmon declines is murky, it's clear that Alaska's most iconic fish is in trouble.

"These projects, especially KSM, couldn't be in a worse location," said Sanderson of Central Council.

"We have five species of Pacific salmon that use the Unuk. Salmon is our traditional food. If anything happens to them, we will be in a world of hurt."

Central Council announced its formal opposition to KSM two years ago. The April 2012 resolution argued that any breach of the mine's tailings dams could have "catastrophic effects on the environment, downriver and into Southeast Alaska waterways."

The Ketchikan Indian Community, another federally recognized tribe, has passed a similar resolution. And several other Southeast tribes have signed a joint letter of concern to Cullen, the Canadian Parliament member who represents the area where KSM would be built. Leaders from Metlakatla Indian Community, City and Organized Village of Saxman, Organized Village of Kake, and Douglas Indian Association signed the letter last fall.

Seabridge has not responded directly to Alaska Native concerns, tribal leaders said. Contacted by *First Alaskans*, Rudi Fronk, the company's chairman and chief executive, said in an email that his company is aware of the tribal resolutions but he referred questions about them to Garrett Cooper, Vancouver-based project manager for the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, one of the Canadian agencies involved with KSM's permitting. Cooper referred the matter to an agency spokesperson in Ottawa, Karen Fish, who completed the circle of non-response by informing *First Alaskans* it was up to Seabridge to provide comment.

However, Fish noted in an email that Alaska Native groups had the opportunity to weigh in on KSM during a

45-day public comment period last fall and will have another chance to do so after Canadian environmental regulators issue a comprehensive study on KSM's permit application. Fronk has said in television interviews that he expects the project to clear the Canadian environmental permitting process by mid-2014.

In public comments on the KSM project, the U.S. Department of Interior has urged Seabridge to address the concerns about subsistence fishing and other issues raised by Alaska Natives tribes.

"DOI shares the interests of the tribes that the KSM project not result in any negative impacts to Unuk River salmon and eulachon subsistence fisheries," said Pamela Bergmann, regional environmental officer, Department of Interior.

FINDING A CROSS-BORDER VOICE

Southeast tribes have begun reaching out to their indigenous counterparts across the border, particularly the Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs, who are based in Kitwanga, B.C., downstream from the deposit.

In a November 21, 2013, letter to federal and provincial ministers of the environment, the Gitanyow raised concerns about KSM, most notably how it could pollute the Nass River, the third largest salmon producing river in B.C. Seabridge discounts the risk to the Nass River.

"Salmon populations in the Nass River will not be affected by the KSM Project," Seabridge claims on its website. "There will be no impacts on water or salmon because no acid-generating contact water will be released into the environment."

The Gitanyow want the Canadian government to put the brakes on the project until more extensive studies and First Nations consultation is conducted.

"It's too big of a project. There are too many downstream impacts," said Tara Marsden, Recognition and Reconciliation Implementation Coordinator, for the Gitanyow.

As this issue of *First Alaskans* was going to press, Southeast tribal lead-



ers were planning a cross-border meeting of tribes and First Nations for late March 2014 on Prince of Wales Island. They envisioned a strategy session aimed at building a unified voice of aboriginal opposition to the various mine projects that threaten transboundary salmon and other resources. The goal was to get all 19 tribal councils in Southeast and several First Nations from B.C. on record with concerns about the mining boom and in favor of establishing a formal cross-border process to address aboriginal concerns "We would be open to working with any group that shares our same concerns. I definitely think there's a need to make those connections," said Marsden.

Annita McPhee, president of the Tahltan Central Council, a First Nations with a membership of about 5,000, said Tahltan chiefs have begun speaking with Alaska tribal leaders downstream in Wrangell.

"We have done a lot of work with First Nations downstream. That's why we were able to stop some big developments in the Sacred Headwaters," McPhee said.

She was referring to the Tahltan's successful efforts to persuade Shell Canada to stop natural gas development in a region of the Tahltan's traditional territory known as the Sacred Headwaters, where the Stikine, Skeena and Nass Rivers originate. The Tahltan also recently helped persuade the B.C. provincial government to put on hold for one year plans by Fortune Minerals to develop a coal mine in the Sacred Headwaters region.

"We have said yes to a lot of development. But we also want to protect our way of life," McPhee said.

Churchill, the Haida weaver from Ketchikan, said that's exactly what's at stake in Southeast Alaska.

"We see this as a potential danger to our salmon and way of life." ◀

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Chris Miller is a freelance photographer based in Juneau. See more of his project "Taku—a River Divided" at csmphotos.com.

This photo shows part of the proposed location for KSM's open pits (foreground). The mine's waste rock storage facilities, designed to hold over 2 billion tons of waste, would lie in valleys below (center right of photo). In the distance, Sulphurets Creek flows toward the Unuk River (out of sight) which drains into Alaska's Misty Fjords National Monument near Ketchikan. The Unuk is one of Southeast Alaska's top king salmon-producing rivers.

MICHAEL FAY PHOTO