

Anti-KSM groups seek federal help

Meanwhile, state agencies say there will be no 'significant loss in productivity' due to potential activity at proposed mine



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Editor's note: This is part one of a three-part series. Check back next week for more on the KSM mine.

A proposed British Columbia transboundary mine that would dwarf any mining development in Alaska has attracted the attention of environmental groups in the state because of a concern that runoff from the mine will degrade Southeast Alaska's fish habitats.

Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell, also known as KSM, is currently undergoing permitting in B.C. If it became operational, it would be one of the largest mines in the world, capable of producing about 10 billion pounds of copper, 133 million ounces of silver, more than 38 million ounces of gold and 200 million pounds of molybdenum. Seabridge Gold Inc., the company that owns the would-be mine, expects it to be operational for 52 years.

Although the proposed mine site is located in northwest B.C., Canada, it sits at the headwaters of the Unuk River, which flows into the Misty Fjords National Monument near Ketchikan. The river supports all five species of salmon, as well as hooligan.

That's why 40 organizations and individuals in the states, mostly Alaska, have signed a letter to the Alaska delegation in Washington, D.C., urging them to engage with the Canadian and British Columbian governments on the issue of transboundary mines. The fear, the letter states, is "that mining development in northwest British Columbia poses significant risks to downstream Alaskan interests, including water quality, customary and traditional fishing and hunting, commercial and sport fisheries and tourism."

Through the letter, the groups, which include Petersburg Borough Mayor Mark Jensen, the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and Taku Fisheries and Smokeries in Juneau, hope to gain Sens. Mark Begich and Lisa Murowski and Rep. Don Young's "assistance and leadership to identify appropriate mechanisms to provide specific guarantees the natural resources we depend on will not be harmed by upstream development."

A smaller group of stakeholder organization representatives visited D.C. this week to deliver the letter and meet with the delegation and other groups they hope will advance their cause. During its visit, the group aimed to determine what kind of collaboration can occur between the U.S. and Canada in planning for the mine's water quality and fish habitat impacts.

Juneau commercial fisherman Bruce Wallace was one of the people who addressed the Alaska delegation Thursday, and said the meetings were productive.

"All three offices agreed that there's a need to elevate the question and have a dialogue with the Canadian people who are in charge of the process at the national and provincial level," Wallace said.

Seabridge submitted the KSM project environmental assessment application in March 2013. The application was accepted into the environmental assessment review process in August 2013. Kyle Moselle, large project coordinator for the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, said a working group tasked with studying the mine's environmental impact should forward its recommendation on to the B.C. and Canadian governments by May. The working group includes three representatives from the Alaska state government. The mine must go through permitting processes by both its provincial and federal governments.

Also during the environmental groups' visit to D.C., they met with representatives from the State Department, the Department of the Interior, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Environmental Protection Agency, among others. The groups are concerned that Alaska will reap no benefits from the mine, but will deal with all the environmental consequences.

"The risk is entirely one-way," said Brian Lynch, of the Petersburg Vessel Owner Association.

Lynch was one of the visitors to D.C.

Dale Kelley, of the Alaska Trollers Association, said the groups are concerned that the United States is not going to have a say in what is happening up stream in Canada — but that the impact will be felt regardless.

"If (KSM) is built, we hope there are no problems. But what we know most about is fish. Fish don't like suspended solids, and they don't like heavy metals. Obviously, the fear is it's going to impact those systems," she said. "There aren't many processes to go by, and certainly not many that are binding between the nations."

Moselle said Alaska has been working closely with Seabridge on the project through its members on the KSM working group. Resource managers from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game attended all group meetings and studied the environmental assessment. Canadian First Nation groups are also involved, Moselle said.

Through its representatives on the working group, the state has determined the development of the mine is not going to harm Alaskan fish habitats.

“Fish and Game went through the environmental assessment and calculated and concluded 383 square meters of fish habitat loss” because of the construction of a bridge over the Unuk River, Moselle said.

That’s about the size of an NBA basketball court.

“It’s not going to result in a significant loss in productivity,” he said.

The state government has monitored and tested water quality for six years where the Unuk crosses into Alaska’s domain, Moselle said. And because ore at the proposed KSM site has been exposed to years of weatherization, heavy metals are leaching into the water naturally. If anything, controlling the process by way of a mine will improve the already “degraded” water quality, he said.

“Mining is a water-management project with a gold or copper by-product,” Moselle said.

Also, B.C. is aware of water quality concerns surrounding transboundary mine development, Moselle said; they’re not flying blind.

“B.C. has water quality guidelines; they also have mining regulations,” he said. “They have an environmental review process. They have all the same things we have here in the states. They’re comparable to the water quality and mining regulations and environmental review in the U.S. There are differences, but taken as a whole they’re comparable and I think that’s been some of the misunderstanding by U.S. stakeholders.”

During the stakeholder groups’ visit to D.C., the Summit on Headwater Transboundary Development was held in Craig by the Organized Village of Kasaan, another signee on the letter. Representatives from Seabridge attended the mining meeting, as did Chris Zimmer, of Rivers without Borders.

Brent Murphy, Seabridge Gold Vice President of Environmental Affairs, said the meeting went well.

“We heard the concerns and we answered their questions,” he said. “These concerns exist on both sides of the border and ... the overwhelming design philosophy for the KSM project is the protection of downstream environments and that is ensuring protection also for Alaskans.”

Murphy said Seabridge hasn't had complaints from B.C. environmental groups.

Zimmer was on a different page.

“At best there is a skeptical audience here,” he said from the Craig mining meeting. “If anything, the presentation glossed over a lot of the issues. All they kept saying is they are confident in their plan. All we kept saying is, ‘What if you’re wrong? What if it fails?’”

Murphy said that if KSM is successful in its permitting, the earliest development would begin would be the end of next year. And although groups from Alaska would like to be assured that the mine, and other transboundary projects, won't hurt Alaska fish, Lynch said there is no real circumstance that would placate them — save not building the mine.

“No, we can't really see a mine we'd be really satisfied with, to be quite honest,” he said.

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