

Clark's mining push meets resistance

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Premier Christy Clark's push for new mines in British Columbia is becoming mired in growing controversy.

On Wednesday, a delegation from Alaska was in Washington, D.C., to lobby the U.S. government concerning five proposed mines in northwest B.C. that are on watersheds draining into southeast Alaska.

The delegation, representing 40 businesses, tribes, commercial fishing groups and environmentalists, claims the mines pose unacceptable risks to Alaska's salmon fishery.

"We're really worried about where this is going to go," Brian Lynch, executive director of the Petersburg Vessel Owners Association said about the proposed development of the mines near the Alaska border.

Mr. Lynch said he's worried because the B.C. government seems to be simultaneously fast-tracking several mines without providing adequate resources for environmental reviews.

"I doubt any agency could handle that work load," he said. "The money is just not there to do that kind of work – and that scares us."

In a written statement, Mr. Lynch said the B.C. mines threaten "some of Alaska's most prized salmon-producing rivers," including the Taku, Stikine and Unuk.

He said Alaskans are worried about acidic waste-water leaching from the mine site, perhaps for hundreds of years.

In a statement, the B.C. Ministry of Environment said that, “No matter where we live, we all share a responsibility and commitment for the environment.” The government added that it is working with the U.S. and Alaska governments on transborder concerns.

Also on Wednesday, Taseko Mines Ltd. filed a second action with Federal Court seeking to overturn a decision by Ottawa that rejected the company’s New Prosperity Mine on environmental grounds. The company alleges Environment Minister Leona Aglukkaq and other officials held “inappropriate meetings with aboriginal opponents to the project during critical decision periods.”

The flurry of action in the courts and in Washington is a clear signal of how tensions are rising as the B.C. government pushes ahead with its promise of seeing at least eight new mines opened and nine others expanded by 2015. Three new mines have recently opened and three are expected later this year. B.C. currently has 20 mines or expansions moving through the environmental approval process.

Some of those mines – such as the Kerr-Sulphurets-Mitchell mine being developed by Seabridge Gold Inc. – have the potential to affect water quality in Alaska. A company official, however, says the mine will meet environmental standards in B.C. and will not pose a threat to Alaska. Other mines, such as Taseko’s project, which does not drain into Alaska, pose localized, but extremely challenging environmental problems.

Few of the mines, it seems, are going to get built without a fight.

Taseko’s project was rejected earlier this year after a federal review concluded it would pollute Fish Lake, which the Tsilhqot’in First Nation sought to protect.

Taseko responded by immediately filing a Federal Court challenge stating that the government review had looked at the wrong engineering plans and had failed to note the proposed tailings pond would contain a thick liner to stop seepage.

On Wednesday, Taseko went back to court to file a second challenge – this time alleging that Tsilhqot’in First Nations representatives had held “a series of unprecedented and inappropriate meetings” with government officials while a decision on the mine was pending. In documents, Taseko claims the “process was unfair and the decision should be set aside.” The federal Environment Ministry declined comment because the matter, it said, is before the courts.

“The latest legal action is a desperate attempt by a desperate company to distract everyone from the facts,” Tsilhqot’in Chief Joe Alphonse said in a statement. “Enough is enough. It’s time to end the pointless pursuit of a bad mine and move forward.”