



FIRST NATIONS FISHERIES COUNCIL

of British Columbia

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BC First Nations devastated by recent Mount Polley disaster

The First Nations Fisheries Council of British Columbia (FNFC) expresses its deepest concern for the people of the Upper Fraser River watershed, whose pristine salmon habitat has been affected by the recent Mount Polley mine tailings pond breach near Likely, BC. On August 4th, the dam containing millions of cubic meters of tailings failed, spewing toxic sludge into Hazeltine Creek, Cariboo Creek, and Quesnel Lake. The wastewater and silt contain unknown levels of arsenic, mercury, lead, copper and cadmium, along with other toxins and heavy metals.

The breach occurred just as record-breaking numbers of salmon are making their way up the Fraser River toward their spawning habitat in the Quesnel system.

“The First Nations in this region of the province have fought hard for decades to protect our dwindling salmon stocks, and in some years, haven’t been able to harvest any food fish at all due to conservation concerns,” said Thomas Alexis, the FNFC delegate from the Upper Fraser region. “The timing of this disaster couldn’t have been any worse. Most of the stocks destined for the upper Fraser are in the red zone according to the Wild Salmon Policy and are deemed stocks of concern by the upper Fraser First Nations. This was to be the first year that the Quesnel stocks would be returning at an abundance that would allow for food fisheries for First Nations in the area, but that’s now in question as we await further information on salmon health concerns.”

To date, reports from the BC Ministry of Environment have indicated that the drinking water ban has been lifted for most of the surrounding area, and that fish have been declared safe for human consumption. However, no information has come out regarding the longer-term impacts on salmon runs destined for the upper reaches of the Fraser River watershed. Drinking water guidelines are not the same as water quality guidelines that protect the health of aquatic organisms like resident fish species such as rainbow trout, migrating, incubating and rearing salmon, and numerous species of phytoplankton and zooplankton that are the foundation for healthy aquatic ecosystems. Increased testing on the water and sediments is needed to assess both the immediate and long-term effects of the contamination on salmon, resident fish species, and the aquatic environment.

“Reports are coming out now that say the water is safe to drink and the fish are safe to eat, but nobody’s talking about what’s going to happen to the salmon in the long term,” said FNFC Executive

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Director Jordan Point. “The toxins in the river could impact the habitat to the point of impairing the salmon’s migratory success and future spawning. We’re going to need to be vigilant in the post-crisis stage with clean up and monitoring.”

The BC First Nations Health Authority is conducting its own independent testing for drinking water quality and salmon contamination.

While Imperial Metals, the company that owns and operates the Mount Polley mine, is responsible for the design, construction and operational management of the mine, the Province is responsible for ensuring that the facility is designed and operated under rigorous safety requirements meant to prevent such dangerous spills from occurring. The Mount Polley operation was required to undergo a rigorous environmental assessment process during its initial construction, but such operations are often granted extensions by the government without conducting a thorough follow-up evaluation. First Nations in BC are viewing the Mount Polley spill as an example of why the government needs much stronger environmental safeguards in place for all natural resource extraction projects.

“The buck stops with the province,” said FNFC Chair Ken Malloway. “If this could happen at the Mount Polley mine, who’s to say that it couldn’t happen with any of the other projects throughout the province that are happening close to fish habitat? The laws and regulatory processes right now favor the business of resource extraction more than our pristine environment and the lifeblood of the people – our salmon. BC First Nations need to hold the government to account to make sure that there are proper laws and regulations in place to protect the people, the fish, and fish habitat from disasters like this in the future.”

The FNFC would also like to commend other First Nations fisheries organizations in the Fraser, particularly the Fraser River Aboriginal Fisheries Secretariat (FRAFS) and the Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance (UFFCA) for their quick collaboration and ongoing communication on this issue.

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