



American Fisheries Society

Organized 1870 to Promote the Conservation, Development and Wise Utilization of the Fisheries

5410 Grosvenor Lane, Suite 110 * Bethesda, Maryland 20814-2199

301-897-8616 * FAX 301-897-8096 * www.fisheries.org

Donna L. Parrish
President 2014-2015

Douglas J. Austen
Executive Director

Date: 21 August 2014
To: USEPA Region X
Subject: Pebble Mine Comments; Docket # EPA-R10-OW-2014-0505
From: Doug Austen

On Monday 4 August 2014, the tailings dam of Imperial Metals Corporation's Mount Polley copper-gold mine failed, sending 19 million cubic yards of mine waste downstream into a tributary of British Columbia's Fraser River (see: <http://globalnews.ca/video/1491048/aerials-of-destruction-caused-by-mount-polley-mine-tailings-pond-breach-2>). The spill turned a 1-m wide creek downstream into a 30-m wide torrent and washed out a road. Authorities imposed water-use bans 30 km downstream, but those bans will not protect spawning or rearing salmon because as little as 5 parts per billion of copper can impair a salmon's ability to smell, which is a key for their ability to find their way home to spawn and to evade predators.

Low copper concentrations can have far-reaching behavioral and pathological effects on fish, especially in low ionic strength waters. Dilute copper concentrations (5 µg/L) impair salmonid olfactory function (Giattina et al. 1982; Hansen et al. 1999a; b; Baldwin et al. 2003; Sandahl et al. 2006; Hecht et al. 2007; McIntyre et al. 2008), making them more susceptible to predation (McIntyre et al. 2012). In laboratory studies, Hansen et al. (1999c) found that Rainbow Trout *O. mykiss* and Brown Trout *Salmo trutta* actively avoided metal concentrations characteristic of those in the Clark Fork River, Montana. Similarly, Woodward et al. (1997) reported that Cutthroat Trout *O. clarki* avoided metal concentrations simulating those found in the Coeur d'Alene River Basin, Idaho. The migratory behavior of Atlantic Salmon *S. salar* was altered by releases from a New Brunswick copper-zinc mine (Elton 1974). DeCicco (1990) found that Dolly Varden *Salvelinus malma* migrations were altered by an Alaskan copper mine and Goldstein et al. (1999) observed altered Chinook Salmon migration associated with Idaho metal mines. Esselman et al. (in Chambers et al. 2012) and Hughes (2013) reported <15% intolerant fish in an assemblage, once catchment mine density exceeded one mine per 5 km.

Imperial Metals Corporation is a respectable Canadian mining firm, the mine and tailings dam were built to modern technical standards, and the breach occurred on a sunny summer day, not after an earthquake or a major storm event. The modern Mount Polley Mine tailings dam is the same type of tailings dam proposed for Pebble Mine, and it was designed and built by the same engineering firm that designed the Pebble Mine dams, Knight Piesold (see: <http://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/mining/largemine/pebble/water-right-apps/index.cfm>).

However, the Pebble mine and dams are proposed to be over 100 times larger than Mount Polley and in a geologically and hydrologically less stable area.

The Mount Polley tailings dam failure underlines the high risk of mining in the headwaters of Earth's largest wild salmon fishery in Bristol Bay.

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