

PRESS RELEASE

REVEALED: THE DIRTY SECRETS BEHIND B.C.'S CLAIM TO BE A WORLD-CLASS MINING JURISDICTION

(May 17, 2021) - British Columbia's aim to become a choice supplier of metals and minerals needed to build a greener global economy will fail unless laws are changed, according to [a new report](#) released today. Legal reform and better enforcement are needed to force B.C. mining companies to live up to the claim that they are world leaders in social and environmental responsibility.

The report, produced by [SkeenaWild](#) and the [BC Mining Law Reform](#) network, highlights risks to the health and safety of communities and the environment from 12 B.C. mines – the “Dirty Dozen”.

“Our report shows there is still a gap between the rosy picture the B.C. government and the mining industry are trying to promote and what is actually happening on the ground. By permitting these risks and pollution issues to continue, the government is putting the mining industry itself at risk as more and more purchasers around the world shift to socially and environmentally responsible sourcing,” says Nikki Skuce, co-chair of the BC Mining Law Reform network.

The report shows risky mines and mine proposals litter the province. Abandoned mines continue to leak toxic runoff into waterways and the cost of clean-up, if it happens, is likely to be shouldered by B.C. taxpayers because mining companies are not compelled to provide financial guarantees to cover these costs, as happens in other mining jurisdictions.

“Mines tend to be in remote locations and most British Columbians are probably unaware of the damage many of them do to the environment and the risk they pose to local communities. Our report is a wake-up call for government and the public at large. The current situation cannot continue,” says Greg Knox, Executive Director, SkeenaWild.

The report points to solutions for improving the mines to prevent these problems from recurring. Many of these solutions are being echoed by scientists, engineers, organizations, First Nations, and political leaders alike. B.C. still needs to fully implement the expert recommendations for improving tailings safety that were issued in response to the catastrophic Mount Polley tailings dam collapse. There is yet to be a strategy for closing and cleaning up abandoned mines. A commitment to ensuring the polluter pays has yet to be implemented.

“British Columbians understand the importance of mining, but they want it done responsibly. For that, we need smarter policy that protects environmental and social values. It is frustrating watching the government drag their heels on making some of these changes that are both recommended by experts around the world and already being implemented in other mining jurisdictions,” says Adrienne Berchtold, Ecologist & Mining Impacts Researcher, SkeenaWild.

All 12 mines on the list threaten local environments and communities across B.C. but are usually operating within B.C. laws and regulations which, in many cases, fail to meet the demands of an increasingly discerning global market and investor base. The report urges that if the recommended solutions are pursued, many of the “Dirty Dozen” could be removed from the list in future years, and B.C. could move closer to being a leading jurisdiction for responsible mining as we address climate change and move to a more sustainable energy future.

Report Background:

The “Dirty Dozen” report is intended to be a bi-annual list of mines that threaten local environments and communities throughout British Columbia that is released during “Mining Month”. Our hope is that recommendations are implemented and some mines listed now will no longer be profiled in two years.

The “Dirty Dozen” includes five coal mines owned and operated by Teck Resources, B.C.’s largest mine operator, in the Elk River Valley. Selenium — an element that is toxic to humans and animals beyond very small doses — has been leaching from their waste rock piles and severely polluting surrounding waterways for decades. Selenium concentrations in mine site water are at times so elevated it is considered hazardous waste.

In March this year, Teck was fined \$60-million – the largest penalty ever imposed in B.C. – for contaminating waterways with selenium in southern B.C.

Also on the list is southern B.C.’s Copper Mountain mine on the Similkameen River, in a watershed that is home to steelhead trout and coho, sockeye, and endangered chinook salmon. The mine has a long history of polluting fish-bearing waters, leading local Indigenous communities to feel unsafe accessing traditional foods.

Copper Mountain is planning to expand operations and raise the height of its tailings dam by 65 per cent to 255 metres – taller than Vancouver’s highest building. The potential consequences of the mine’s existing dam failing are already considered extreme. Collapse of an even higher dam could destroy stretches of the Similkameen River and send devastating pollution far downstream. As it stands, the B.C. government does not require an environmental assessment of Copper Mountain’s expansion.

Selection of the 12 mines was based on their proven or probable impacts on sensitive environments and species, violation of Indigenous rights, unsafe management of tailings waste and/or water contamination, inadequate reclamation funding, and/or non-compliance with environmental permits.

These criteria led the authors to select some other mines that they argue tend to fly under the public’s radar but are clear examples that B.C.’s current industry regulation falls short. These include the Peace River region’s inactive Shasta-Baker mine, where environmental non-compliance and tailings facility risks are high; the abandoned Anyox mine, a major past-producing mine that has never been properly closed or remediated; and the Bell and Granisle mines on Babine Lake, where unexamined risks related to mine discharges and environmental monitoring could be putting sockeye salmon at risk.

It should be noted that while the “Dirty Dozen” are the most concerning mines and mine sites in B.C., they represent only a small portion of the over 100 contaminated and risky mines sites around the province. A map of contaminated mine sites in B.C. can be seen [here](#).

The “Dirty Dozen” full report is available [here](#).

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