

# **Are Fraser sockeye found downstream from the Mt Polley mine tailings spill safe to eat?**

Opinion piece by Alexandra Morton

The latest Canadian mine tailing pond spill into a BC waterway occurred last week near Likely, BC. Prior to April 4th, Imperial Metals' Mt Polley gold and copper mine tailing pond was contained behind a gigantic wall of sand. There were warnings by employees and government that the tailing pond was over-filled and could rupture. The warnings were ignored and now much of this toxic material is in Quesnel Lake.

Quesnel Lake flows into the Fraser River, which flows throughout British Columbia, through the City of Vancouver into the Strait of Georgia.

This spill is not over. Material from the tailing pond continues to escape, lake bottoms have currents that will continue to move the mountain of sediment into the water column. This incident involves far more than the drinking water of the Town of Likely.

The reason for tailing ponds is to keep toxic waste produced by mining contained. There are now mining tailings spread all over the spill site and satellite images show the tailings moving towards the Fraser River.

I am writing to suggest British Columbians look at this in a realistic light, because this affects all of us.

Heavy metals, such as those found in these mine tailings tend to bioaccumulate in living organisms. They can also kill insects which young fish feed on. Quesnel Lake is an important fish nursery and rears a large part of BC's wild salmon. Fewer bugs mean fewer salmon, toxic bugs means toxins in salmon.

I have been contacted by First Nation colleagues asking if the salmon in the Fraser River are safe to eat. It is a breach of government responsibility that every First Nation along the river has not already been contacted with test results. I understand the First Nation Health Authority is doing testing. We all need to see those results ASAP.

I have received pictures and reports from several places downriver from the Imperial mine spill of salmon with their skin peeling off. Is this exposure to acid? Guessing is dangerous and we need answers.

The situation has forced Cayoose Creek Band Chief Michelle Edwards, Xaxli'p Chief Darrel Bob and Tsk'way'laxw Chief Francis Alec to close all fishing for their communities. This is leadership that takes responsibility for human health.

I have spent 30 years trying to protect wild salmon from farm salmon disease. As a result, I am very familiar with government smoke and mirrors when a business activity threatens the health of British Columbia.

Simply put, the escape of millions of cubic meters of mine tailings into the Fraser River should concern all Canadians whether they live downstream of a mine or not, because we are a society that cares about the fate of our children.

The urgent question many people are asking: “are the salmon from Fraser River dangerous to eat?”

- 30 -

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*Alexandra Morton is the Executive Director of the Department of Wild Salmon. The Department of Wild Salmon links together the experience and knowledge of hundreds of salmon groups, First Nations, university departments and labs. We use on the ground real-time information and cutting edge science to pinpoint the problems and empower communities to manage the impacts on wild salmon from a local level with a province-wide perspective, keeping each group financially independent.*

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