



Wild Times

A Fish Story

by Joe Foy

A friend of mine recently told me a story about a fishing trip that I could scarcely believe. Sound familiar? We've all heard fish stories. My friend had been out on a lake on BC's Chilcotin Plateau. The fishing had been so good he'd decided to paddle in to shore before he reached his legal catch limit. His fishing rod was propped on the side of the canoe with the lure dancing in the sunlight as he paddled in. He swears that fish kept leaping up out of the water trying to bite the lure – the fishing was that good!

I am inclined to believe his story though – because the lake he was on is a famous fishing spot. It's called Fish Lake. It's part of Tsilhqot'in Nation territory, and has been providing the people there with fish dinners since time immemorial.

Now – let me tell you a fish story of another kind.

In early 2009, a federal environmental review panel was appointed by then Minister of the Environment, the Honourable Jim Prentice, to conduct a review of a proposal by Vancouver based Taseko Mines Limited to construct a massive open pit gold and copper mine in the heart of Tsilhqot'in territory.

The proposed mine was to be situated right next to – you guessed it – Fish Lake (“Teztan Biny” in the Tsilhqot'in language), and the company planned to drain the trout-filled lake in order to create a place to dump its rock waste from the mining operation. Taseko had named the proposal the Prosperity Mine. As people from all over the country heard about the mining company's plan and the Tsilhqot'in Nation's determination

to protect their territory, a groundswell of public support spread across Canada.

Thankfully, the proposed Prosperity Mine was turned down in late 2010 by Minister Prentice, who said at the time that, “[The environmental review report] was scathing in its comments about the impact on the environment. It was, I would say, probably the most condemning report that I've seen.” But in a shocking turn of events, within three months of being turned down Taseko Mines Limited came back with a modified mine proposal, which they called the New Prosperity Mine. Then in November 2011, the new federal En-

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vironment Minister, the Honourable Peter Kent, allowed for a second federal environmental review of the failed and reworked mine proposal.

Taseko's New Prosperity mine proposal now aims to excavate an open pit mine, which would be up to 1.6 kilometres across and over half a kilometre deep, just downstream from the outflow of Fish Lake. According to the federal review panel on the first proposal, “If expansion of the open pit were to occur in the future to maximize the extraction of the resource, the open pit would encroach on and eliminate Teztan Biny (Fish Lake) even if attempts were made to preserve it.” The new proposal claims the infrastructure wouldn't be expanded in the future, but given the position of the ore, it's easy to see why the Tsilhqot'in would be concerned.



Tailings and potentially acid-producing rock would be stored underwater in a tailings pond four kilometres long, constructed just two kilometres upstream from Fish Lake. This would cover much of Fish Lake's upstream catchment area, including Little Fish Lake and surrounding feeder streams and wetlands. This catchment area now supplies much of the water that flows into Fish Lake and a great deal of the trout spawning habitat that provides the watershed with fish.

Because so much of its headwaters would be cut off by the tailings pond, Fish Lake would need pumps to recycle its outflow water, much like a backyard goldfish pond.

The company claims that their new mine plan “saves” Fish Lake. But I am having a hard time swallowing that fish story. I whole-heartedly support the Tsilhqot'in Nation's opposition to New Prosperity Mine. There is currently a Federal Environmental Assessment process underway. Learn more at: http://wildernesscommittee.org/what_we_do/save_fish_lake



Joe Foy is Campaign Director for the Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest citizen-funded membership-based wilderness preservation organization.



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