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Donahue: If Pebble Mine concerns you, the Palmer Project should too



The exploration site with Glacier Creek, which flows into the Chilkat River, in the foreground and in the background are the switchbacks that serve as the access road to the proposed Palmer Project. Constantine Metal Resources plans to discharge waste water into the ground adjacent to Glacier Creek. (Photo by Derek Poinsette)

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By Shannon Donahue, a community organizer for Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and executive director of the Great Bear Foundation.

At the headwaters of one of Alaska's most pristine and productive salmon habitats, a Canadian mineral exploration company attempts to develop a metals mine. Downstream residents, commercial fishermen, wildlife-viewing guides, and an Alaska Native Village voice opposition, but the Canadian company pushes on, despite struggles with permit approval, no social license to operate, and failure to attract and retain investors. The mining company sows division within the community, wrests control of community forums to discuss the mine, fights local efforts to protect the watershed, and refuses calls for transparency.

Sound familiar? This could easily describe Pebble Mine, but this is the Palmer Project, a proposed copper-zinc-silver-gold mine at the headwaters of the Chilkat River Watershed, approximately 45 miles upstream from my home at the mouth of the Chilkat.

The Palmer Project is a joint venture between Canadian company, Constantine Metal Resources, and Japanese smelter company, DOWA Metals and Mining. Two foreign corporations are trying to plow through an underground mine at the headwaters of one of Southeast Alaska's top coho and sockeye producing rivers, approximately 18 miles upstream of the Chilkat Indian Village of Klukwan, the longest-standing community in North America, and 35 miles upstream of Haines. The Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, home to the world's largest seasonal population of bald eagles, lies in between. A sulfide mine at the headwaters all but guarantees acid mine drainage and heavy metals leaching into the pristine, life-giving, economy-driving, culturally significant Chilkat River, in exchange for the possibility of a few jobs over a short time period. History demonstrates that this will be at the expense of the Chilkat Valley's diverse commercial fishing, tourism, and arts based economy.

Like Pebble, the hydrology at the Palmer site consists of complex connected surface and groundwaters. Some see Palmer Project permitting as a possible test case for Pebble. If the State can get away with insufficient protections at Palmer, that might work for Pebble, too. Palmer's waste management plan consists of settling ponds for wastewater that will then be injected into the ground near Glacier Creek, which feeds the Chilkat. Area hydrology and Constantine's own documents point to wastewater resurfacing in Glacier Creek. True to the State's pattern of privileging profit over people, the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation allowed Constantine to set "trigger limits" many times higher than safe criteria for all heavy metals except mercury so they can legally discharge water high in heavy metals into groundwater that runs directly into the Chilkat. Local residents have repeatedly demanded transparency in Constantine's tracer dye test to determine the level of connectivity. Constantine has denied all requests, and continues to withhold test results seven months after their expected release.

Constantine and DOWA are foreign corporations using Alaska as a resource extraction colony to increase shareholders' wealth at the expense of Alaskan communities, our diverse, sustainable economies, and our salmon-rich lifestyles, and, as the permitting process demonstrates, the State of Alaska is complicit. Former Constantine Vice President, Darwin Green, now CEO of HighGold, told an audience at the Resource Investment Conference in Vancouver, BC, that mining in Alaska is like "going into a third world country with low hanging fruit, but you're in a first world jurisdiction." Green's attitude mimics the Pebble Partnership's push to develop an incredibly risky mine at the headwaters of one of the world's last remaining healthy, wild salmon watersheds, despite strong opposition from those who will be most directly impacted, and demonstrates an outdated, imperialist philosophy that has no place in 21st century Alaska.

As the world faces economic upheaval, a deadly pandemic, and social uprisings, all related to global resource extraction, habitat destruction, and socioeconomic injustices, Alaska has an opportunity to reimagine and construct a diverse, resilient, regenerative economy that works for all people. Alaska is not a resource extraction colony. Alaska can lead the way in a just transition that ensures the wellbeing of our communities for generations.

Shannon Donahue lives in a beautiful, healthy old growth forest where the Chilkat River meets the sea in Haines Alaska, where she works as a community organizer for Southeast Alaska Conservation Council and executive director of the Great Bear Foundation.