



DEFENDING WATER, DEFENDING RIGHTS

# “Our economy walks on the land and swims in the river” CANADA’S FAILURE TO HOLD ANYONE ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE MOUNT POLLEY DISASTER STRIKES AT THE HEART OF JUSTICE

Mining waste from the 2014 Mount Polley tailing dam disaster and continuous waste water discharges into Quesnel Lake have changed the waters which Secwepemc, Tsilqot’in, Lhtako Dene and St’at’imc peoples



“ OUR PEOPLE ARE GRIEVING. MY GRANDCHILDREN WILL NEVER KNOW WHAT ITS LIKE TO FISH AND SWIM IN QUESNEL LAKE. THAT’S THEIR INHERITENCE, PART OF OUR BLOODLINE NOW.”

Nuskmata Mack, Xatsull First Nation



rely on for food, medicines and livelihoods. The federal and provincial governments have launched a criminal investigation into wrongdoing which led to the tailings dam

collapse. Yet despite public demands for accountability led by Indigenous peoples and their neighbours, nearly five years on, no charges have been laid, fines paid or remedies provided to those harmed.

Secwepemc peoples call the place around Quesnel Lake, Yuct Ne Senxiymetkwe, the Greatest of Lakes, the birthing waters. It is the birthplace for 25 percent of British Columbia’s wild salmon and an important place for fishing,

hunting, medicine gathering, berry picking and ceremony.

Since the disaster, Indigenous peoples are forced to choose between exposure to potential toxins in the salmon or give up a traditional food that is a cornerstone of their culture and identity as Indigenous peoples. People described the disaster as ‘a death’ in the community.

Scientists at the Quesnel River Research Centre documented high levels of metals, such as copper, and bacteria in the waters where Mount Polley tailings entered Quesnel Lake. The impacts of high levels of copper on juvenile salmon are well-documented and include disorientation, stress and interference with the olfactory system, which is crucial for migrating salmon travelling to and from their birthplaces. Compounding matters, the mining company was granted a permit to discharge waste water into Quesnel Lake for 5 years.

The First Nations Health Authority commissioned the only known study of the health impacts of the disaster on Indigenous peoples and found that it caused deep emotional distress and a shift in diet as people avoided eating fish over fears of toxic contamination. It is calling on the government to do more research.

**FOR OTHER WAYS TO TAKE ACTION, PLEASE VISIT  
[WWW.AMNESTY.CA/DEFENDINGWATER](http://WWW.AMNESTY.CA/DEFENDINGWATER)**

## **A PREVENTABLE DISASTER**

In 2015, a panel of mine engineering experts assembled to study the root causes of the disaster criticized Mount Polley Mining Corporation, a subsidiary of Imperial Metals, for its failure to implement best

available practices at the mine site. Alarming, it also noted that given current tailings storage practices and technology in use in BC, residents should expect 2 such tailings pond disasters every decade.

British Columbia’s Auditor General echoed these concerns, reporting that over a decade-long period, the province had utterly failed to provide appropriate and timely compliance enforcement at mines across British Columbia. The report noted that had required inspections been carried out at Mount Polley, the disaster might have been prevented. She warned that business cannot continue as usual in BC’s mining sector without further, disastrous consequences.

Although the BC Conservation Officer Service, the RCMP and Fisheries and Oceans Canada launched a criminal investigation into potential wrongdoing that may have led to the disaster, nearly 5 years on no charges have yet been laid. The deadline for charges will lapse on August 4, 2019.

The people harmed by the Mount Polley disaster have repeatedly called on provincial and federal governments for justice and remedy. Two United Nations bodies have called on Canada to hold those responsible to account and to provide remedy to those harmed. The question is, when will Canada heed those recommendations?

## **ACT NOW**

Join with the people living near Quesnel Lake in demanding that the federal and provincial governments provide them remedy for the Mount Polley disaster. Call on both levels of government to

- Commit funding and resources to carry out long-term studies into the effects on Quesnel Lake and surrounding waters of the Mount Polley tailings breach and ongoing water discharges from the mine site and make the results public at regular intervals;
- Suspend the company's water discharge permit pending the results of an independent health impacts study
- Provide those harmed by the Mount Polley mine disaster with the remedies that each affected community determines are necessary;
- mandate full financial bonding from Imperial Metals for the long-term costs of remediating the Mount Polley mine site and ongoing water treatment; this is particularly important as the mine will suspend operations in May, 2019 for an undisclosed period of time.
- share information about the ongoing joint investigation being carried out by the BC Conservation Officer Service, federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Royal Canadian Mounted Police before the limitation period for laying charges expires on 4 August, 2019.

Please send a short, polite letter supporting these calls for justice to:

**Prime Minister Justin Trudeau**  
 Prime Minister's Office  
 80 Wellington St Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

**Premier John Horgan**  
 PO Box 9041 STN PROV GOVT  
 Victoria, BC V8W 9E1

Consider also sending copies of your letters to your Member of Parliament and, if you live in British Columbia, to your Member of the Legislative Assembly.

*"We are afraid to eat our fish. We don't want that sickness in our bodies and our children's bodies. We call on Canada to respect our Indigenous law and our rights. This is a crisis situation for our people and our land. We are in crisis, as are the salmon, the moose and the water for our children. I want to be able to look my children and grandchildren in the eye and to say I did all I could to protect the land and water."*  
 Nuskmata Mack, Xatsull Nation.