



WATERSHED TALK NEWSLETTER

Produced by the Fraser River Aboriginal Fisheries Secretariat

August 8, 2014 – Morning Edition

Volume XI, Issue 12

Is it Safe to Fish?

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At 3:45 a.m. on Monday August 4th, the massive tailings pond at Mount Polley mine breached. 10 million cubic metres of effluent roared down Hazeltine Creek, cutting a swath 35 metres wide. The debris and toxic slurry then emptied into Quesnel Lake – just as spawning sockeye and Chinook begin returning to the Quesnel River system. A second lake, Polley Lake, was also impacted.

First Nation fishers throughout the Fraser River watershed are deeply concerned about the contamination of fish and water. People are struggling with the question:

Is it safe to fish and to eat the fish that we've caught?

Here are three points for First Nations fishers, their technical experts and leadership to consider when making decisions about their health and safety.

1. MOE Water Quality Test Results

It was an anxious four days as people waited to hear if the fish that they catch would be safe to eat.



Hazeltine Creek, August 5, 2014

On Thursday the BC Ministry of Environment (MOE) released test results of samples taken on August 4th at three sites: two on the north shore of Quesnel Lake and one at the headwaters of the Quesnel River (near Likely). The MOE reported that contaminant concentrations were “consistent with drinking water standards” at all test sites. Based on these results, impact to aquatic life and fish is not expected.

Dr. Trevor Corneil, Medical Health Officer for the Interior Health Authority (IHA) said that he found these results “very reassuring.” However, the drinking water ban remains as IHA awaits the Polley Lake test results.

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Is it Safe to Fish? *(continued)*

“The immediate results appear promising,” said **Pete Nicklin (Fisheries Biologist, FRAFS/Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance)**. But he cautioned: “Long-term monitoring and testing for bio-accumulation must be conducted throughout the ecosystem.”

2. Dilution of Contaminants

Heavy metals in the tailings are in most part settling in the sludge in Hazeltine Creek and Quesnel Lake. Remaining sediments will have to then travel the 100 km of Quesnel River. Much of this material is expected to settle before entering the Fraser River. “The volume of water in these two rivers is expected to significantly dilute any contaminants heading downstream,” said **Neil Todd (FRAFS/Nicola Tribal Association)**.

3. Migrating spawners

The fish that people are catching today are coming up from the Pacific Ocean on their way to the spawning beds. The Nicola Tribal Association has advised its fishers that “the salmon that we are catching in our area were in the ocean approximately five or six days before they were caught ... [Salmon] fresh from the ocean and hundreds of kilometres downstream from Quesnel Lake, combined with the initial water quality results at Quesnel Lake, should mean that fishing can carry on as usual.”

Summary

In the wake of this environmental catastrophe, there is still the promise of a strong run of spawners returning from the Pacific. How the Mount Polley spill might impact the Fraser and its fish will be closely watched.

“If it becomes an issue of public health and safety, we’ll let our people know,” said **Ernie Crey (Sto:lo Fisheries Advisor)**.



The breach at the Mount Polley tailings pond. For scale, see the bulldozer in the bottom left-hand corner.

This afternoon in Watershed Talk:

- Upcoming testing including sampling to be undertaken by First Nations and partners.
- The In-season sockeye run report from Fisheries Biologist Kelsey Campbell.

**Mount Polley updates from FRAFS
at this link:**

[FRAFS on Facebook](#)



Links:

- **Cariboo Regional District Emergency Operations Centre**

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CRDEmergencyOperations?fref=ts>

Website: <http://www.cariboord.bc.ca/>

Twitter: @cariboord

Ph.: 250-398-5581

- **BC Ministry of Environment**

Website: <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/eemp/incidents/2014/mount-polley.htm>

More to come ...